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SOLDIERS OF THE BLACK GOAT by MARIAN O'HEARN

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WHEN you've got the sniffles, a chill, and your throat feels irritated, it's a sign that germs are probably at work in mouth and throat.

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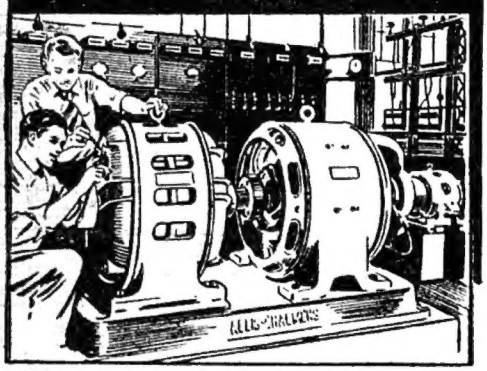

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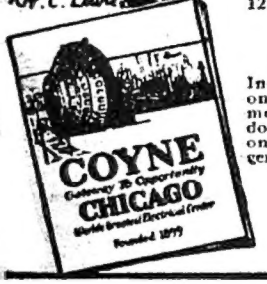

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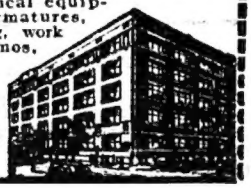

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The Readers speak their minds.

COVER BY H. W. SCOTT

Illustrations by: Isip, Kramer, Orban and Schneeman

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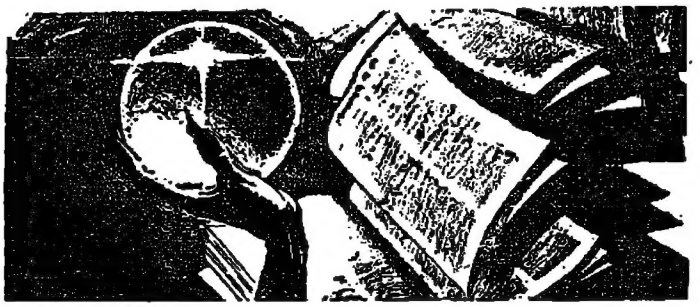

OF THINGS BEYOND

L. Ron Hubbard, absent this half year now from the pages of Unknown, returns next month with a story based on an idea as peculiarly uncomfortable as "Sinister Barrier" or "None But Lucifer." "Death's Deputy" should, I think, have that quality of unsureness that I, at least, find stimulating—and which, from letters and talks with readers, others do also.

Hubbard discusses those inexplicable bearers of death, a strange class of people who do exist—as any insurance company can tell you!—and seem to carry tragedy with them. "Death's Deputy" is, of course, pure fantasy. Naturally. But—there are those marked by some strange fate to walk through life trailing death, disaster and destruction behind them. So, Captain McLean, imaginary character—may still be the very sincerely friendly neighbor of yours—

Incidentally, Unknown enjoyed one of those accidents of timing that publishers sometimes fall heir to. "None But Lucifer" was begun last spring, worked out in detail last summer, bought and started on the process of being set in type late last summer. And it was on the stands at the time Europe was busily proving for the world that Lucifer does rule this planet, and both Sherman, Gold and de Camp were right.

Supporting Hubbard's yarn next month will be Part Two of J. Allan Dunn's tale of gods and men, a short story by Laurence Bour, Jr., "Call of Duty," which I feel has something genuine to offer, an added touch of mystery to a current mystery. Silaki Ali Hassan will be back, too, with another of his Arabian fables, "The Wisdom of an Ass," as typical of both ancient Arabian Nights and modern nights on Arab caravan routes as was his "Caliph of Yafri."

THE EDITOR.

The Moving Finger Writes,

---AND HAVING WRIT---

How did you like Cartier's cover?

Dear Mr. Campbell:

I don't believe anyone could ever thank you enough for two mags like Unknown and *Astounding*. I have been reading Unknown since its inception, and I don't believe I have read a bad story yet. According to my analysis there is a tie for first place between three novels. They are: "The Ghoul," "Slaves of Sleep," and "None But Lucifer," with "Sinister Barrier" close behind. I can't read enough stories by L. Ron Hubbard, L. Sprague de Camp, and H. L. Gold. I don't care particularly for Lester del Rey, although I can read them interestedly, By that I mean I don't think that they are up to the regular Unknown standard. H. W. Scott does some fine covers, and Cartier is excellent for inside illustrations. I am beginning to like Isip's illustrations better all the time. Hubert Rogers' illustrations for "Divide and Rule" were the best that have appeared in Unknown at any time.—Norman Knudson, 2516 Van Buren Ave., Ogden, Utah.

Well—Asia has lots of territory.

Dear Mr. Campbell:

The best Unknown in some time: Page's yarn rates where it does only because the other two are so good:

(1) "The Monocle"
(2) "The Bronze Door"
(3) "Sons of the Bear-God"
(4) "The Question is Answered"
(5) "Day Off"

May Wan Tengri go on—and on—and on.—P. S. Miller, Scotia, N. Y.

Ouch—but we still like criticism.

Dear Mr. Campbell:

In the August number of Unknown "The Ghoul" was very poor, far below Hubbard's standard. I didn't object to the premise—it was the illogical and somewhat juvenile unfolding of the plot that caused me to dislike it. Lester del Rey's "Forsaking All Others" was highly entertaining, however, and more than worth the time spent reading it.

The September issue was, in my opinion, the finest one yet published. "None but Lucifer" was truly magnificent, one of the finest novels I have read—and this despite one or two illogical twists in the plot. More from these two authors. "The Coppersmith" and "Portrait" deserve high mention, especially if their competition is kept in mind. Guernsey's short, "Danger: Quicksand" was acceptable, too; but the article—not so good. For one thing, "Over the Border" had little inherent continuity

Continued on page 129

BUT JIM. I DON'T SEE HOW WE CAN AFFORD TO MARRY ON YOUR LOW PAY
MARY'S RIGHT. I HAVE NO RIGHT TO ASK HER TO MARRY ME ON THE MONEY I'M MAKING
LOOK HERE. N.R.I. HAS TRAINED HUNDREDS OF MEN LIKE ME TO MAKE GOOD MONEY IN RADIO. I GUESS I'LL GET THAT FREE BOOK
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SOLDIERS OF THE BLACK GOAT

BY MARIAN O'HEARN

WHEN Hester Gurney reached the edge of Duck Acre, she walked more slowly, but her awkward, shapelessly clad feet still sent up constant puffs of dust. She used her cane more frequently and her gaunt shoulders stooped under the stained, patched cape which fell from neck to ankles.

The crowd was already waiting for the execution and the field was filled with men and women who seldom moved or spoke as they stared

at the scaffolding. Hester, too, looked up at it, erected on the highest end of the meadow, and her lips stretched into a thin, moist smile. The elevated platform gave back the raw glare of new wood, and on the single tall post heavy chains glistened in the light. Underneath and wedged tightly around the whole structure were weeds, wood chips and dried logs, all thoroughly soaked with oil.

The sun laid a reddish haze over the raw scaffold and the sky seemed to press downward like a metal plate which might crush the somberly dressed figures waiting for the spectacle which had brought them so far from the village of Salem. Their very stillness created a thickness in the air, and they glanced sidewise, constantly, at the equally apprehensive faces around them, for there was no way of knowing that one of the accursed was not standing beside them. No certainty that, at any second, their bodies might not be brushed by garments which, in one touch, could bring disaster.

Hester sighed and hunched her aged cape closer to her neck, thrust her wide, dusty black hat back until the sunlight revealed a face which might have belonged to an unclean bird. The widely smiling, thin lips were the mouth of death, coldly blue and moist. Lines like fine scars rayed down the sides of a flaring-nostriled nose and crisscrossed the rough, yellow skin. Only her eyebrows were dark. Thick and glossy were they could be seen through the unkept tangle of clay-colored hair which spilled over her forehead. And through the lank wisps, her restless gaze took in every detail of the scene, swinging from sky to earth and back again. But her eyes were startling in that grotesque face, for they were clear and bright as a child's. Dark, ice-pointed gray.

Hester's approach was noticed by the throng, and it eddied back to give her space—space which would be a barrier against danger. She adopted an even more leisurely pace, turned left and wheeled right half a dozen times before settling herself near the front line of spectators. Having chosen her spot, she adjusted the rusty cape and fixed the brim of her old hat so that it would keep the sun out of her eyes. Then she folded both hands on top of her stick and leaned forward with her neck thrust outward and upward. Once more the crowd dropped into its tense stillness and a moment later broke into an abrupt, queerly animal roar —a peal of madness peaked by thin, hysterical laughter as everyone turned toward the road.

A LUMBERING wagon drawn by two horses and surrounded by armed guards was moving onto the field, followed by two light carriages. The wagon stopped below the scaffold, the guards formed into a square and surrounded the prisoner as she stepped down. A youngish woman whose hair fell about her head in stringy disarray. Taut as a steel thing, she stopped to stare at the platform, and her body began to jerk convulsively.

Hester bent forward and her uncannily young eyes played over the prisoner's face as the guards prodded her forward to where the black-robed judge started the march to the scaffold. Behind him walked a brawny, roughly clad man—the executioner—and after him came the prisoner, surrounded by the soldiers.

But at the bottom of the steps the woman halted and, her eyes turning into disks of black terror, screamed until the hard sky was split

with the echo. "No . . . no, I tell you! You can't! Hear me! Hear me!"

Two soldiers caught her arms and dragged her up to the platform where the judge and executioner were now waiting. They held her and the judge began to read the order of execution. "Johanna Milrow —for the practice of witchcraft which resulted in the death of the cows of Increase Lattingham and for familiarity with demons and other evil spirits."

The guards began to pinion her arms, but in a sudden burst of strength she tore away from them and threw herself at the feet of the judge. "I can't be burnt. I can't be! Listen to me. I'll confess! It's true—everything is true. Give me a chance to repent; don't put me to death!"

The rigid stillness clutched the mob again. Someone drew a breath like a hoarse sob, and Hester's lips began to move as, from somewhere within the folds of her cape, she brought out a twist of feathers tied with a knotted cord. She held it up in her fingers and those around her flinched from the gesture of derision which she made toward the scaffold.

The judge's voice carried clearly over the field. "Confess all for the sake of your soul and you may find forgiveness beyond death. Name any others you know to be witches. Name all of those you recognized at the Witches' Sabbath."

"Yes, yes! I'll name them. The last Witches' Sabbath was on the fifth day of the last month—always it is the fifth day. I met there Mistress Cartevor and Mistress Whitehead. The Evil One took the shape of a great black goat and held court. We swore allegiance on our knees."

The piercingly high, thin voice halted and a great sigh went up from the crowd. The judge folded his hands over the huge black book he carried. "How did you get to the Witches' Sabbath, woman? Did the Evil One carry you there or did you take the form of an animal and fly through the night to the appointed place?"

"I . . . I was carried. I knew nothing of what was happening because I fell into a stupor of faintness and woke to find myself at the Sabbath."

"And you recognized no other there except Mistress Cartevor and Mistress Whitehead? No others? Guards! Search the crowd for the women named."

He turned slowly back to the kneeling, supplicating figure. "It is for the good of your soul that you confessed and you will find God's help in eternity. We will be merciful because of your repentance."

He signaled to the soldiers and they pulled Johanna Milrow to her feet. The judge spoke to the executioner, who handed him a small bag and a piece of cord. Bending over the almost unconscious woman, he tied the little bag around her neck and then nodded at the executioner, who, taking the limp figure from the soldiers, carried it to the post in the middle of the platform. Swiftly, the hanging chains were adjusted and a lighted torch dropped on the oil-soaked wood.

A sheet of flame sprang up like a brilliant wand and a scream which might have come from the darkest hell broke against the ears of the crowd. A second later there was a roaring detonation and the fire danced higher. The explosion was the result of the little bag which the judge had tied about the condemned woman's neck, for it had contained gunpowder and meant a swift death as compared to one of long-drawn-

out agony. That had been his gesture of mercy in consideration of her confession.

Smoke billowed up and clouded the sky, but the crowd continued to stare fixedly, their faces wolfishly distorted.

The soldiers were filing through the meadow, calling the names of the women whom the witch had accused. "Mistress Cartevor! Mistress Whitehead! Stand forth."

HESTER GURNEY could taste her own breath, hot and dry, burning against her lips. If Margaret Cartevor were here— Margaret was a mere girl, seventeen, and already widowed. Her young husband had set out on a trading trip the preceding fall, and months later word of his death had come back to Salem. Margaret had been different since then; had avoided people so determinedly that she seldom left her house.

"You—" A burly soldier stopped before Hester. "Give your name. By the looks of you, it'll be that of one of the witches."

"Would that be true?" She straightened and thrust her face upward until it was close to the soldier's. "You'll regret saying so when you learn who I am."

He stepped backward, uneasily, and the color melted from his beefy cheeks. "No harm, mother; I'm but hunting witches."

She swayed after him, her lips twitching into their moist, wide smile. "Ask the judges up there who I am and what my privileges are. Go and ask him!"

But his face was a sickly gray thing from which his eyes stared glassily as he whispered: "Then I know you. I've heard what Hester Gurney did for—"

"Be still, you fool, and get away from me."

He lunged into the crowd and she grinned after him, chuckling deep in her throat, but the people around her once more retreated, as the other soldiers arrived, for they wanted to show that she was entirely apart from them. She leaned on her stick again, hunching forward for another view of the fire, as a woman ahead suddenly whirled from the spectacle to stare about frantically. Her eyes were glazed and her face glistening with perspiration. She pulled the kerchief from her head and threw it wildly from her, calling:

"She named Margaret Cartevor, who only yesterday played with my little one as we passed her house! The child talked about her eyes—said they made her think of angels and spirits! Now, I've left her alone—when I get back she may be dying of the witches' eye. Help me, someone! Help! Is there a cart to take me to Salem? My baby—"

Hester dribbled her cane forward, starting to go to her, but other women closed in around the hysterical mother and she stopped. All the women were sobbing now, all babbling and shrieking for carriages to take them to rescue the child from this last-discovered witch.

Scowling and mumbling, Hester let her shoulders droop into their usual hunch and pulled the broad hat lower about her face. Her glance knifed through the crowd, over it to where a line of wagons, carts and carriages awaited the end of the execution and the return to Salem. She sidled away from the crowd, her old, long-toed shoes giving her a heavy gait, but she moved swiftly and her stick seldom touched the ground. Reaching the dirt road, she quickly looked over the carriages and decided upon a cart at the very end of

the line. The driver was regarding the flaming pyre with a queer blankness on his face, and Hester recognized him as a nephew of the executed witch. She hurried toward him.

"Bend down here, Abel Meredith. We've business to do."

He looked at her dully. "There's no business between us. You've seen what comes to your kind and I want no talk with you. Last week in Trotterstown a man was burned because he knew too many witches. Now go."

He started to cross himself, only to violently check the movement, for Salemn frowned upon the sign of the cross as a protection against witchcraft, believing that simple prayer was more effective.

But Hester moved closer and sneered: "You know who I am and what I can do, so get over on that seat and turn the cart around. You're taking me to Salem."

He shook his head and caught the reins tightly in his fists as if to prevent her seizing them. "Nothing you rode in would ever again be safe, and if you don't give up bothering me, I'll call the soldiers."

She laughed softly, safe in the knowledge that she was out of earshot of the crowd. "Your aunt just died as a witch, and the families of witches know things other people do not. Such as—the Word. The Word which, once uttered, can raise the dead to life."

The man shot to his feet with his eyes straining in their sockets. "The Word! Don't say it. You know—"

"And you know. The soldiers would be interested because only one kind ever learn the Word. Help me up."

He obeyed and, thrusting down a clammy hand, lifted her to the seat. She nodded approvingly. "Get started before too many people notice us—wheel around here."

He snapped the whip and sent the cart turning crazily, almost tipping over as the wheels thrust against the deep ruts in the road. Hester settled beside him and drew her cape close in spite of the heat. A breeze sprang up behind them and smoke from the pyre rolled over the sky ahead of them. Sweat appeared on the man's forehead, but Hester watched the road and listened for the sound of following carriages.

It was an hour later when she sighted the little house nestling below the protection of clustered trees just beyond the outskirts of Salem. "Put me down here."

He jerked to a stop, helped her to the ground with violent speed and cracked the whip over the horse as soon as she stood erect upon the earth. She did not even glance after him, but made for Margaret Cartevor's home, where she found the girl kneeling before a strip of ground which she was striving to turn into a flower bed. The sun was bright on her bare dark head and she had pushed her neckcloth open so that firm, fair flesh showed. But the emptiness left by many tears was in her eyes as she looked up at Hester.

"Good day, mother. I was tending my flowers, but they do poorly."

"Let's go inside." The woman's wrinkled brown hand closed on Margaret's slim arm, but the girl stepped swiftly away, flushing as she shrank from the other's touch.

"Never mind." Hester flicked her tongue over her lips to moisten them, and, in the bright sunlight, they were an even darker blue. "Just hurry."

Margaret hesitated, glancing about as if for escape; but then she noticed the streamers of smoke which were floating from the direc-

tion of Duck Acre. "Were you there?" she asked, her voice low. "Everyone was going, but—I couldn't!" She shivered and moved even farther away.

"I always go. Hurry, girl."

The younger woman's glance touched her fearfully, but then she turned to the door. "Come in."

Hester's clumsy shoes scuffed against the hall floor and she closed the door behind her. "Margaret, get what you'll need and come away with me. Johanna Milrow named you on the scaffold and someone said you'd been trying to send the demon into their child by looking at it. You have only a few minutes. I'll hide you—later, we can figure out what to do."

But the young widow was regarding her with the horror of a child confronted by madness. She swayed backward, as if wanting to run, and spoke so fast that her words tripped and broke over each other. "Sit down and I'll make some tea. It's hot, and standing in the sun so long has made you tired."

"Hush." Hester's unkept fingers once more caught the girl's slim wrist. "I'm not crazy or taking leave of my senses. Johanna confessed on the fire and said she had seen you at the Witches' Sabbath—you and Sarah Whitehead."

"Witches' Sabbath . . . you . . . are you telling the truth? Witches' Sabbath? I—"

Her eyelids drooped and she stumbled forward, her face lead-colored and her throat working convulsively. Hester caught her, thrust her down into a chair and slapped her briskly back to consciousness. "You haven't time for that if you want to escape the fire. Take whatever money you have and I'll hide you for a few days until I can get you out of the country. The fools will say the demons spirited you away."

"No. I can't go. I've almost no money—just this house and the land. I've no money to go anywhere, and besides, where is there to go? I've no one in the world. My husband brought me here and here I'll stay."

"You won't—alive. If you don't break under the ordeal, they'll say it's because the demons give you strength. If you go crazy and confess, you'll be burned. Come."

MARGARET got to her feet and stared about the room, about the little house, with her eyes wide and black. And Hester knew she was saying her actual, final farewell to her dead husband. Until now she had clung to the memories of him which the little house contained, but this was the end.

"They'll be here before we get away if you don't hurry."

"But where are you taking me?"

"Never mind that. We can talk later."

Margaret seemed to return to the moment—to shaking reality. "Go with you—to escape? Everyone knows you're the most dangerous witch of all! So dangerous they're afraid of you, and it's said you even have the protection of Thurlow Reeves, the judge, because when medicine and religion failed, you saved his youngest child—saved her with the forbidden words of the demons' cure."

Hester's eyes played over the young face with the touch of bright little needles. "I'm the only one who can keep you from the scaffold and the fire."

"Why do you want to save me? That I must know or maybe it would be better to face the ordeal. Is it—"

Hester cut her off and her voice

"Hester Gurney," she moaned, "you you must be a demon you change your form at will—"

no longer held its thin, high edge. It was low; flute-low and rich, and under the repulsive surface of her face was something deeply moving. "There's a reason, but not much of a one. Just the whim of a foolish old woman."

"But you're not worrying about Sarah Whitehead. Maybe because she's already made the Pact!"

"Decide whether you want to live. Sarah Whitehead doesn't matter to me. She's a mean, scandal-mongering woman who's told lies about

everybody in Salem, so she can get out of her own troubles."

"Whether I want to live—" Margaret repeated the words slowly, her eyes filling with old grief. "Today . . . did Johanna Milrow was it really terrible?"

"They gave her the gunpowder sack as an act of mercy."

"Oh!" The girl's lips trembled against each other and the tinge of color, which had returned to her cheeks, once more disappeared. "If I go with you—oh, please be truthful with me—if I go with you, I won't have to make the Pact? In the name of the true God, tell me that! I won't have to bind myself over to Satan?"

"I promise you. Witch or no, I'm human, too, and I'm not trying to league you with a familiar spirit. I'll hide you in the woods beyond my place."

Margaret straightened and drew a breath which sobbed through the whole room. "Then, yes, I'll go with you and trust in God to protect me from you."

HESTER straightened up and backed away from the chair on which Margaret Cartevor sat. And, as her eyes narrowed to take in the effect, she chuckled until her body shook. This was not the pretty young woman who had entered her house half an hour before. This was a crone with dirty, tangled hair, blotched skin, and a scar on one cheek which pulled the full lips into a leer.

"You'll be all right now." Hester's chuckle swept into a laugh. "Come in here and admire yourself."

She prodded the girl's shoulder and Margaret followed her into the narrow bedroom where a wavery mirror threw back a shocking reflection. Margaret's eyes, dark and soft in her distorted face, strained open. Her hands moved slowly up to her face, touched it in shrinking horror and she whirled wildly. "What have you done to me—what? Oh, God forgive me—"

"Hush," Hester snapped. "It's only on the surface. I'll give you oil to clean your face at night. Now, get into these clothes."

"No . no! I don't believe you. You've used your damnable sorcery to make me into a hag. A ghastly old hag! Maybe I'll get like this inside, too—so ugly that the devil will claim my soul. Look look at that face."

Hester hesitated and then, with a faint sigh of impatience, turned back into the other room where she took a jar from a shelf and dug into it with long, wrinkled fingers. Returning to the girl, she said: "Put out your hand."

Swiftly, she rubbed a thick, yellow oil over the girl's hand which she had stained with root sap. "See"—as the stain disappeared and revealed the fair, clear skin. "It'll do the same to your face. Now, get into these clothes."

Almost grimly, she stripped off the girl's garments and pulled aged, patched things over her head. Finally, she tied a shawl about her hair and gave her a pair of broken shoes. "There you are, old woman. Now, let's get out of here before that weak-witted Abel Meredith leads someone up to the door. He'd betray his own mother."

"Where are we going?"

Once more Hester laughed, and the sound was so harsh that Margaret shivered. "We're going to the place where Grannie Spikedon lived before they burned her. Nobody would go near there because they believe Grannie's demon still lives in the house."

"Grannie Spikedon's! Not there! Why, when she was a midwife—" Margaret broke off and looked at Hester. "Besides, everyone knows that her demon really lives in the house."

Hester nodded indifferently. "That needn't worry us. She was a fool even when she christened babies in the name of Zabulon, so don't be afraid of any spirits she left behind, because they're too weak to work against the power of those I'll set to watch over you."

Abruptly, she bent forward, her gray eyes burning fiercely. "Do you doubt that? You know some of the things I've done. Do you think poor old Grannie's familiar spirits could harm anything to which I've given my protection?"

"No." The word was a faint, terrified whisper and the girl moved back hastily. "I believe you, but if you're helping me only to destroy me, I'd rather face trial. If you put demons to watch over me, won't they claim me, too? Won't I become their property?"

"No." Hester was impatient again. "People like poor old Grannie may be the slaves of their demons, but I'm not. They have to obey me because *I* have only one master."

"One master and that is—" But Margaret broke off and cried: "No, don't tell me—I don't want to know. Hurry, before I lose courage."

Hester led the way from the weather-stained cottage and stood before the door for a moment while her glance sped toward Salem and then swept over the stretch of woods behind. She motioned for the girl, and started out at a pace which left Margaret gasping, and when she halted, Hester urged her on, almost forcibly. Hurrying through the woods, they finally emerged into the sunlight at the edge of a bramble-covered field. Only careful inspection of the wildly grown brush revealed the brown, broken roof of a house, and Hester ducked beneath the bent tops of the weeds, making a path for Margaret to follow. As they neared the crumbling porch, field mice scurried away, and as they stepped through the door, great, dark cobwebs swayed in the breeze.

"Ugh!" Margaret drew back, but Hester went in briskly, signaling for the girl to follow. Calmly, she crossed the dust-covered living room where decaying furniture slumped into ghostly outlines. Thrusting open another door, she stepped into a denlike space which was swept and clean. It contained a bed spread with fresh blankets, a small chest of drawers and a chair.

Margaret, wavering on the threshold, murmured: "This looks as if there really were—someone here!"

"I come here, when I want to get away from my own house. Don't worry about it. Stay in this room and nothing will happen to you. After dark I'll bring food and things you'll need. But don't go outside—and you'd better not use a light, tonight. Now, I want to get back and see what's happening."

"You're going to leave me—in this place? I can't stay! I'd go crazy!"

"It's better than prison. Here—"

From the folds of her cape, she took the sprig of feathers tied with cord. "Keep this on you and you'll be safe. Now, hush, I've got to go."

She closed the door after her, scuttled across the floor and out into the bramble-grown field. It was only when she emerged from the field and reached the edge of the woods that she paused, and then, hearing the thud of feet, slipped quickly into the shadows. As the feet came closer,

she chose a huge, umbrella-shaped tree and sat down beside it, pulling her feet under the edges of her cape. With half-closed eyes she waited and listened.

The feet thudded directly to her and she kept her eyes closed, her head tilted back so that the hideous yellow of her face showed. Something prodded into the folds of her skirts and she jerked convulsively, opening her eyes to glare up at the soldiers standing over her. "What's your name, mother, and what are you doing here?"

She reached for her stick, and slowly, heavily, pulled herself to her feet. Holding it in her hand, she thrust her neck outward. "Another prod with that gun of yours and it'll be your last. If you've nothing better to do than disturb old women at their rest—"

"We're looking for the witch, Margaret Cartevor. Answer us and curb your tongue when you do it."

"Curb my tongue—why, you red twisted rogue." She lifted the stick, her gray eyes too bright against the yellow of her skin.

One of the soldiers caught the speaker's arm hastily and pulled him back, mumbling a warning. The whole group retreated, to halt only when they were six feet away. "We want to know your name. If it's not Cartevor we have no further business with you."

"My name? Ask him—that drooling wretch there with you! He'll tell you that I'm Hester Gurney, and now get on with you."

THEY LEFT, stumbling in their haste, and she waited until they had disappeared into the dense wood shadows, then she started hastily through the trees to her own house, which sagged against a low, boggy hollow of land around which sparse clumps of cattails grew with strange grotesquerie. The ugly tall weeds and the number of broken, dead trees close to the hut were like an ominous shadow over the ugly little structure.

Hester opened the door and immediately dropped into a low rocker to rest. The room was clean, and the boards which showed beneath the scattered homemade rugs glistened with mellow, old lights. There were several tables and chairs, an "easy basket" on a stand, a tall, dark-wooded bookcase. Across the room two doors stood open, one leading into a tiny kitchen, the other into a bedroom which was filled with gloom because of the drawn shades.

After a brief five minutes, Hester got up, took off her broad felt hat and the ragged cape, to go into the kitchen. The dress beneath the cape was just as old, stained and disreputable, but she moved differently now. Her step was light and quick, and even under the full, fluttering skirts, the long flow of muscles was apparent. She carried her head differently, too. Proudly, as a girl might have done.

In the kitchen, she found cold meat, bread, cheese and milk which she placed in a basket. Then, returning to the living room, she waited until dusk, when, once more in the cape and broad hat, she started back to Margaret Cartevor's hiding place. But there, she merely rapped sharply on the door, left the basket on the step and hurried away. Back at her house, she once more rid herself of the cape and hat and lighted a fire on the hearth. For a long time she sat before it, and when she finally stirred it was to enter the darkened bedroom.

It took her a long time to light the whale-oil lamp, and then she stripped off her clothes, pulled on a wrapper and sat down before the wavery

mirror. She took up the jar of oil which she had shown to Margaret Cartevor, spread the contents over her face, neck and arms. Wiping it off, she looked thoughtfully at her clear, healthily tinted brunette skin and then went out to the tiny kitchen where she washed her hair and bathed in a big wooden tub set in the middle of the kitchen floor. With that finished, she returned to the bedroom and took clothing from a low chest under the bed. Underclothes, well-made shoes, a dress of soft black with a tiny, lacy collar at the throat and frills of lace at the wrists.

Once more she sat down before the mirror and stared at herself. The crone was a woman now. A clear-skinned, well-built, attractive woman of not more than forty. A face that was strong-mouthed, strong-jawed and sensitive. The face of the woman whom Dr. Esiah Gurney had loved.

She thought of Esiah, as she looked into the glass, for she had dressed for him. This would have been his birthday and he had died ten years before—died on a wilderness trail, sending back a cynically resigned letter. He was dying of the fever with which he had been experimenting. Similar experiments had virtually banished him from Salem, for after using the blood of animals to combat the fever, his patients had died. Five of them—and the town had seethed and prayed while the murmur of "sorcery" grew louder. Only sorcerers used the blood of beasts in their cures. She had persuaded him to leave, and months later had received his letter telling her good-by. Since then—

She sighed a little and got to her feet. In a corner of the bedroom, she pulled back a bit of flowered cloth which covered a shoe box and from the depths of the box took out two heavy books. Carrying them back to the chair before the hearth, she pulled an oil lamp close and opened the first book. Slowly she turned the yellowed pages to "The Diseases of Babies and Children."

THE ROOM grew quiet and Hester's face relaxed as she read. More than once she forgot that Esiah was not sitting in the other chair and the kindly quiet of the night drooped over her—only to be broken apart by a sudden, furious knocking at the door.

Startled, she let the book drop to the floor and checked her own impulse toward flight. If she did not answer, whoever was at the door would leave, unless the soldiers—She waited, counting the beat of her own pulse, while the knocking grew frantic. "Hester Gurney—in the name of God, I shall go mad!"

It was Margaret! Margaret, here at her door, and if she let her in now she would not understand! But she couldn't let that racket continue, either, for there might be soldiers searching the woods. She picked up the books, covered them with a cushion, blew out the light and went noiselessly across the room. "Be still," she hissed, and slowly opened the door. But the girl stepped back with a scream choking under her suddenly lifted hand.

"You . . . you . . . I came for Hester Gurney! But you're Hester Gurney—"

The thin moonlight, slanting through the door, had revealed her face.

"Come in and keep still." She reached swiftly for the girl's arm, almost jerking her inside the little house. "Be still, you fool!"

"No, let me go. You're not even what I thought you were. You must

be a demon yourself, to assume different forms at will!"

Hester leaned against the wall in the darkness and laughed—her thin, high laugh—as she began to move through the darkness to the bedroom. "It's no news to you or anyone else that I can do what I will. There's no other witch with the secrets of power that I know. Be quiet now and watch."

There was a strange, hissing sound, like the flaring of thousands of little flames, and a whitish light sprang up in the door of the bedroom. Hester stood just beyond it, dimly seen through the wall of flame. "Watch closely and breathe deeply —that'll make you safe."

A rancid smell began to come from the flame. A sickening, distasteful odor, but the girl stared in breathless, fixed fascination at the leaping flame. Bubbles appeared in it—white bubbles which grew into brilliant transparent balls which spun wildly toward her. The odor was filling her nostrils, strangling her, nauseating her; but she did not move, for the great, gleaming balls were engulfing her. She tried to wrench herself away, her eyes straining, her lips twisting; but, with a little moan, she sank to her knees and huddled there, half conscious.

The flame lost its whiteness and the tumbling balls disappeared. Queer that the blaze touched nothing and harmed nothing. She shivered violently and straightened to see Hester standing in the doorway, looking as she had always known her to look, yellow-skinned and hideous, clad in stained tatters.

Margaret's eyes stared piteously from her grotesquely colored face. "What have you done to me? I have heard that is how some of—them go to the Sabbath."

Hester laughed and bent close to the floor, concealing the dying flame. When she stood up, it had disappeared and she made her way across the room to light the lamp. "You and your talk of the Sabbath. Everyone mumbles of it. The Sabbath is no mere flare of light. It's—"

"What?" The girl was still crouching on the floor as if she lacked the strength to rise.

"It's something you're better off not knowing. Now, why did you come here? You might have run into people hunting for you."

"When you opened the door tonight you were young and beautiful. Only true demons could change themselves like that, unless—"

Hester sank into her chair and chuckled, her thin, moist blue lips moving. "Unless what?"

"I don't know." Margaret got up almost fearfully. "Was that you I saw?"

"Maybe it was. But even so I wasn't so beautiful. Sometimes I look sixteen and fairer than the sun. Tonight, I was tired, and when I'm tired my Taros tries to be willful. Taros is one of the demons who works for me, a weaker one from the air region who can't stay on earth long at a time. But let's forget what it's better for you never to hear. I'll take you to the hut and you're to stay there until I come for you."

"I can't go back." Margaret was moving haltingly toward her as if torn between a desire to run to her protection and a fear greater than of death. "I can't, Hester. When I was alone, I heard a noise. I thought it was a field animal and then I saw—"

"What did you see? Hurry; we can't gabble here all night."

"I saw a—familiar spirit. An incubus. A horrible, dwarfed little man with a sort of horny hide and

a hanging head. He crept toward me!"

Hester made a small sound in her throat and arose angrily. "Well, what did you do—run?"

"No; I held up the charm you'd given me and he disappeared—just disappeared into the shadows. But then I couldn't stay."

"You see? You're safe enough. My charm will keep off a dozen incubi or any other spirits that might be around poor old Grannie's place. Incubus!" she snorted. "An incubus isn't any more important than an ant—couldn't frighten anybody except a baby. Come. You'll have to go back, because I might have a few soldiers here before morning. Don't think Abel Meredith'll keep quiet about taking me to your house!"

"I'll die if I go back there."

"And that'll still be better than burning." Grimly, Hester got her cape and hat from the peg, put them on and went to the door. "Turn out the light."

She slipped outside and after a moment's waiting told the girl, "All right; time to go."

Margaret followed, her breath coming in gasps like sobs, but Hester ignored the sound and strode out into the open where the thin moonlight fell onto the boggy ground. But as she turned toward the woods, a shadow rustled into life. A figure detached itself from the gloom while the thick mist seemed to creep from the woods after it; queer shadows which clung to the man's heavy shoulders and thick, powerful legs.

He was a big man and so broad as to appear squat. He walked with a slight roll, as if the very power of his body threw him slightly off balance, and his head, which shaped into a peak on top, glistened red in the moonlight. Hester stopped and Margaret crept close to her as they watched him stalk across the open space. His light-red hair was clearer now and there was a straggling mustache of the same shade across his upper lip. His brows were dark and heavy, almost concealing the eyes beneath; his nose and chin had the bluntness of war clubs, so that he was like a creature pulling its way from the mire of the ages. Something struggling into life thousands of years after its time.

"Don't speak," Hester murmured to the girl.

THE FIGURE came on until Hester Gurney's dry laughter rang out. Then it stopped, swaying on widespread legs, running a stubby hand across the leather middle of a jacket made of a lighter shade than the too-full trousers.

"So it's you, Sim Grobeler," Hester called, stepping forward. "What are you doing? Hunting the spirits of women you've burned—or maybe they're tormenting you with the night madness?"

The rubbing movement of his hands increased and Margaret dug her teeth into her lip to keep her shudder from turning into a cry of terror. Simon Grobeler was the official executioner. The man whom the community paid handsomely each time a witch was burned—and whom everyone shunned more carefully than the most notorious witch. He was said to have become rich by the deaths of condemned sorcerers and was also believed to be mad. No one knew anything about him, for he had been brought from some far place by a committee of citizens when even the lowliest person in the town had refused the dread position.

"Before I tell you that, you'll tell me things, Hester." He thrust his torso forward, his mouth grinning

under the ragged mustache. "You'll tell me who is with you."

Hester took another step toward him, dribbling her cane forward so that it made a strange mark upon the earth. Grobeler saw that mark and straightened, his heavy head snapping up. "You know I was funning and meant nothing of what I said!" he called swiftly, his voice breaking with hoarseness.

"Don't say what you don't mean. I'll tell you nothing, Simon, except to warn you again that you can come here only on the twelfth night. Now go."

"Hush, for Heaven's sake." The giant's face was actually gray. "Don't talk of twelfth nights in the open—even the trees carry stories."

"Then don't come where they can hear. Get on your way while you can."

The broad, brutish face paled even more and he wavered. "I've got to see you, and if that woman with you—"

"She's no concern of yours." Hester's voice cut off his words, and once more she marked the ground with her stick.

"Maybe you'll think so when I tell you that they say Grannie is about again."

"Posh! If that's what you came for, run home while you're safe."

"No, it's not and I swear I have to talk to you—give me a minute, anyhow."

Hester's narrowed eyes played over him with a brightness which dimmed the moonlight. "Wait here—right in the spot where you stand."

Turning back, she took Margaret's arm and led her away. "I'll have to talk with him, which means I can't take you back; but as soon as I get him inside, I want you to start for the hut and stay there."

"Oh, please!" Margaret caught her hand. "Don't make me."

"I have to. You've got the charm and you'll be all right. As soon as I take him into the house, run for the woods and don't stop until you are back in the house. Don't turn on the lights and don't go out again."

She snapped the last words and turned—leaning heavily on her cane—to the waiting executioner. "You can come now," she told him. He sighed heavily and his eyes rolled. He stirred as if arousing from an uneasy sleep and lurched toward the woman, who stopped him with a gesture of her stick. "Go into the house—walk straight ahead without looking back."

He nodded and almost ran for the door of the shack, his great feet striking the earth with shaking force. Anxiously he jerked at the door and stamped into the little house. Hester turned to wave warningly at the girl.

"Well, now." She slammed the door smartly behind her. "What are you trying to do to me, Sim? Coming here at any time you choose instead of the hour I appoint and make auspicious by the proper rites? Suppose someone saw you and began to watch me? Don't let this happen again."

"Nobody saw me come. I took care of that, and besides when I come on the twelfth night with the others, I never have a chance. You're so busy giving out charms and teaching tricks that I go home empty-handed."

"And better for you. Otherwise you might get something you couldn't handle. The spirits that I control aren't weak, except when I command them. If they wished, you'd have a bad time, so listen to

me and keep your mouth closed except when I tell you to open it."

"Yes, yes." His lips moved against each other under the ragged mustache and his eyes were round. "I pity the wretches the spirits really have captured—pity them even when I must force confessions from them. If I didn't know that their souls were being saved by confession, I couldn't stand it."

"Don't you think so?" Hester's thin, moist lips curved coldly, as though death were smiling at him. "But what about the fee for the execution? If they didn't confess and go to the scaffold, you wouldn't get that—and you'd have no money at all if witches weren't burnt. I can imagine your pity, Simon. Zabulon grant that I never have need of it."

He smiled, spreading his great, powerful legs apart so that he could stand more easily; but as he met her coldly lined eyes a smile moved about his mouth. "Well, help me this once, mother, even if it isn't the twelfth night. We've a witch now who's stubborn. Martha Eames, who lives a few miles out from the town, and nothing makes her tell the truth, because her familiar spirit is too strong. It's one of the most stubborn demons I've ever encountered and there's nothing I'm able to do against it."

Hester sank down into her chair near the hearth, but she did not offer the executioner a seat and he remained standing. "And why is she a witch? I've never met her at the Sabbath."

"Maybe she hasn't gone that far or maybe there are other reasons she doesn't go to the Sabbath, but the proof is too strong against her."

Hester pulled off her old hat and leaned her head against the back of the chair so that the light made her yellow face into a tired, repulsive mask. "What proof, Simon?"

"She quarreled with the wife of Daniel Frost, and three days later half of their chickens died. But wait"—as the woman started to interrupt—"this Martha Eames had two children—mind you, two children of her own. When the soldiers went to arrest her, they found one of the children in a strange spell, writhing and twisting—like struggling with demons. When the committee visited the house the next day to look for evidence, the child was dead and the other one was going through the same seizures of the Evil One. They're both dead now—their limbs twisted and queer."

"Hm-m-m." Hester looked away from the heavy, loose-lipped face and stared into the flames. "The weather is hot, Simon. You recall that last summer, and the summer before, several children died just the same way—in convulsions like that."

"And each time witches confessed that they had sent the spirits into them."

"Yes, yes, but you see—" She stopped, tore her glance from the leap of the flames and looked back at the executioner's face. His brutish profile made a strange shadow on the wall behind him. She creaked up out of the chair. "I don't know this Martha Eames. I suppose what you want from me is a charm that will be so strong her own demon can be conquered so she'll have to confess?"

"Yes." He moved toward her swiftly, but she touched the floor with her stick and he stopped short.

"Very well, I'll give it to you."

She crossed to the bedroom, and from a drawer took a swatch of soft duck feathers which she tied with a red cord and thrust into a tiny brown sack. She carried it back to Gro-

beler. "There it is. Conceal it in her clothing or bed and she will confess. There are no demons strong enough to fight against the power of that. Now get out."

"Yes, mother; and I'll always remember this, always. I'm so grateful—" His big paw fumbled at a pocket and brought out a coin which gleamed in the light. "If you—"

Hester turned away. "No. I take gold from you only on the twelfth night. Get out."

He thrust the money back into his pocket and strode hastily for the door, sucking in his breath as he left. When it closed behind him, she thrust the bolt into place.

THE SUN spliced warmly through the trees, but Hester kept her old hat pulled well down about her face as she crouched on the earth back of her cottage. This particular bit of ground was dry and she moved from plant to plant by sliding on her knees. The loam and dust clung to her skirts and cape, but she was indifferent to that as she nipped off the ripe leaves of buds and herbs, dropping them into her basket. This morning she was picking cannabis sativa, a hemp weed which was one of her most powerful drugs and for which she had constant need. With the sativa even the most stubborn could glimpse the Witches' Sabbath or fly invisibly through the night.

She did not hear the steps behind her until a man's foot crunched into the soil beside the bush. She stared at the shiny boot and then tilted up her head, squinting into the sunlight. The man stepped back uncomfortably and she dropped more of the leaves into the basket, turned on her knees to contemplate him. "Judge Reeves! Maybe the fumes of these herbs are going to my head or do I really see you here?"

"You see me." He pulled off his stiff hat and clenched it in nervous, pallid hands. His nearly bare skull was pale, too, and the fringe of hair above his ears only emphasized the nudity; but, in spite of that, he managed a certain dignity. His eyes, behind their steel-bowed glasses, were large and bright, almost burning; his mouth was the cold, sure mouth expected of a judge. His black clothes and white stock were immaculate.

"I must, since you speak." She remained on her knees and her stained hands played over her soiled skirt. "Why are you here—unless you're trying to prove something to the citizens of Salem? Maybe you want to show the committee that Hester Gurney is dangerous."

He made a gesture. Jerky and tight. And then he knelt beside her, his black trousers sinking into the earth. "Hester"—there were sudden bright splotches of color in his cheeks, color which might have been left by the impact of hard fingers. "You've got to help me."

"Oh." She sat back, peering, her fact distorted. "So that's it. But I don't have anything to do with the Honorable Thurlow Reeves except on the twelfth hour of the fourteenth day. Then there's plenty we could tell, isn't there? Plenty that'd send black smoke up to the sky—" She let the words trail off and laughed with the shrillness of a night bird.

He caught her arm—and immediately dropped it, drawing back with the color gone from his face. "Keep still or you'll have the smoke going up for both of us. I came for help."

She laughed again, cacklingly, and rested her stained hands on her hips. "The twelfth hour of the fourteenth night. You'll get the help then, judge, and not before. Now go and

leave me to my herb gathering. I've lots to do."

"Wait—" He started to touch her again, but this time remembered and stopped short. "I want help now, right now, Hester. Laban Pickering's child is dying and you can save it. You saved my youngest one; you've got to do it again or—"

"Or what?" she asked, almost crooningly. "I didn't think to hear threats from you. Few people make threats toward Hester Gurney."

"I'm not threatening, but I've got to do this. Listen to me—" His large, dark eyes were glowing coals as he peered into her face. "Pickering's frightened. He says this is a judgment on him for helping in the confiscation of witches' property. He wants to confess and be forgiven in order to save his child's life. If he does—"

"If he does, Judge Reeves and a few other prominent citizens and members of the committee'll be in trouble," Hester finished for him and leaned forward to laugh, her revolting face close to his.

"That would be a sight for Salem, wouldn't it? Thurlow Reeves and his friends condemned to the scaffold. If they all went together it would be a great holiday for the town—a fire that'd last all day."

"Be still. You're talking like a madwoman. Only witches are burned."

"That's right, but—people might get beside themselves if they knew you and your friends worked to send women to the fire to get hold of their estates. This confiscated property, now—how many ways does the committee divide it?"

Reeves pulled himself to his feet, brushing the dirt from his trousers. "You don't know what you're talking about. Good day, mother."

"Good day." Hester turned back to her herbs, but Reeves did not leave. He stood behind her, waiting, with all the blazing intensity dying from his eyes, all expression sagging from his face until the flesh seemed like old, spoiled leather.

She knew that he was there, but did not turn until he spoke.

"In the name of mercy, Hester, what do you want? You can save this child. If she dies, her father will go to the market place and reveal himself."

"As he should." She got up, slipped the basket over her arm. "Laban Pickering has sent woman after woman to the fire and taken her little belongings for himself, just like the rest of you. It's his turn now and I wouldn't help him if I could."

"You helped me." His voice was desperate. "I'm asking you to help me again. It's no harm to you, Hester, having me for your friend."

"Maybe not." She looked full at him. "But if the others wanted to condemn me, you'd agree and take your share of what little property I left."

"That's not true. I swear to you that I'll protect you from anything and everything. Nothing shall touch you—no matters what happens, there'll be no cry raised against you."

"Don't make promises to a witch unless you intend to keep them."

"I'll keep them, every one of them."

"Well," she settled the basket more firmly and gripped her stick in the other hand, "I may be able to do something; I don't know. Tell me about the child. What's come over her?"

"I thought you would have heard

by this time. Margaret Cartevor bewitched her. Just the day before Margaret was named a witch from the scaffold, she talked with the child. Afterward, the little one could speak of nothing but the woman's eyes. And on the very evening that Margaret was named a witch, the child fell ill with no ordinary illness. She fails to get her breath and is near death; the doctor has given up hope."

"Your neighbor's sorrows touch you." Hester cackled and stretched her moist mouth.

"Laban told me that he knew you'd saved one of mine and demanded I ask this of you—he'll stop at nothing to keep the little one alive."

"At nothing?" She narrowed her sharp eyes. "Then you had better bring him on the next fourteenth night. I can use people like that."

"I didn't mean—"

"I don't care what you meant, and I've promised nothing yet, but we'll see."

Hester Gurney trudged past him, her old cape flouncing against his fine black, her stick crunching into the ground. He followed her into the house, where she jerked a dirty hand toward a chair. Then she carried the basket of herbs into the kitchen and returned with a small box in her hands, one with a peculiar folding cover, which she held between both palms.

"Take off your coat."

He almost shot out of his chair, but she looked at him steadily, her unclean fingers clenched on the little box, and repeated: "Take off your coat."

He took it off, and the raying lines on her yellow face spread widely as she surveyed his shirt. A splendid, embroidered, beruffled thing. One that the community would consider a bit gaudy on their respected judge. "Roll up the left sleeve."

She put the box down on the table and opened it, displaying a number of long, unusually shaped needles. Selecting the largest one, she bent over Thurlow Reeves' arm and thrust the needle deep into a vein. He flinched, but she held on, deftly switched a tiny straw tube into the place of the needle and pressed the flesh about the little wound. Then, holding both ends of the tube, she emptied the blood into a glass dish and, using another needle, pricked her own vein. When the tube was filled, she held it over the dish and murmured: "Taros, Taros, on the winds come. Zabulon, witness the oath."

The man backed from the table, drawing a breath which gasped through the small room; but Hester ignored him and poured her blood, drop by drop, into the dish, where it mixed with that of Judge Thurlow Reeves.

"What in the name of the true God are you doing, woman? My blood with yours—"

"Hush—" Her voice hissed across the room, but she kept her eyes on the little dish, murmuring low words as she watched it settle together. When she finally straightened she lighted a single black sperm candle and placed it beside the dish. From a drawer she brought out a huge old-fashioned quill, one that held a strangely bright sheen. Carefully, she arranged a sheaf of paper on the table.

"Now, Thurlow Reeves, sit down and write as I tell you to."

"Write? So that's it—you're asking me to sign the Pact! You're trying to trick me into it, but I won't. Hester Gurney, you won't trick me again or try to make me

one of your own kind. I'll leave here and tell the community what you are—the worst consort of the devil in all of Salem. Heaven may in time forgive me for knowing you, but it will never forget you, black defiler of human souls!"

Hester was moving two chairs to the table and did not even glance up until he had finished his diatribe. Then she looked at him with her eyes like bits of lighted ice in her yellow face.

"Come and sit here. Don't worry about the Pact. Do you think Eblis wants anything as scared as you? And you won't denounce me unless you've forgotten that you went to the Witches' Sabbath the last time you were here—on the fourteenth night."

REEVES' face was not even gray now. It was like streaked, unhealthy tallow, and the fire of his eyes was dulled to ashes. He was shaking so that the loose flesh on his face trembled. "Do you think people would believe you if I denied it?"

She nodded, her face still calm. "They'd believe it—because no one goes to the Witches' Sabbath without retaining the mark. It will be found on you."

"The mark—" But only an animalistic sound came from his lips. "You lie! There's no mark on me. Besides, only witches bear the mark, and I'm not one. You promised, when I first attended your damned sessions, that I would not have to make the Pact with the devil."

"You made no pact, but who'll believe that? Come here, Thurlow."

She put out her hand as she might have gestured to a child, and like a child, he took the dirty yellow claw. She led him to the wavery mirror in the bedroom, turned him at an angle so that he could see the back of his neck and then, with a chuckle, ran her hand against his lower hair, lifting it. There, just above the hair line, was a red, scarlike line. Scarlike and yet—

Reeves turned squarely upon the mirror, losing sight of the mark. His hands felt frantically over the surface of the dresser. "A needle," he muttered, as if speaking to himself. "That'll tell me—beyond all doubt. A needle."

Hester put one into his hands and, once more turning sidewise, he stared at the scar, attempted to push the needle into it. But his shaking hands missed and she took it from him. "Watch, while I do it." Quickly, she drove the point of the needle into the red line. The flesh did not bleed.

Frantically, he caught the needle from her fingers, pushed it deep into the mark on his neck, watching it so intently that his eyes became strained and swollen. But his half-dozen jabs brought no tiniest spot of blood, and he dropped the needle, lifted his arms in a gesture of supplication and fell to his knees.

"Have mercy, mercy," he mumbled. "'Twas only curiosity—the desire to know the truth. But nothing more, nothing to deserve this!"

"Hm-m-m!" Hester snickered. "You lie even to your God, so how can I take chances with you?"

He lowered his arms and looked at her with bloodshot, wild eyes. "Chances—what more would you do with me? I swore that I didn't want the Pact, would never make it!"

"And you didn't. Stop moaning and come out here."

He stumbled after her and sank into the chair before the table. "It would not be good if Laban Pickering denounced himself and you. If

they found the mark on you, you'd go to the fire, judge or no judge. Take that quill and dip it into the blood—your blood and mine. Write out exactly how you and your companions function. Name every one of them and the share each receives when the estate of a witch is confiscated."

Reeves sagged. "If I do that—"

"If you don't, I'll have nothing to do with Laban's child and he'll ease his conscience by telling the truth. Write!"

He picked up the quill, pushed its point gingerly into the reddish mixture in the dish. He labored for minutes over the first letter, and words came even more slowly; but then he began to write with desperate speed. When he finished, perspiration was rolling down his face, drops splashing against the red-lined words. Hester took the paper and read it slowly, her face betraying nothing as her glance swept over the weird document.

I, Thurlow Reeves, confess that I formed an agreement with Laban Pickering, Nathan Banks, Uriah Hale, Simon Grobeler and one other to divide the property of condemned witches as follows: One tenth each to myself, Nathan Banks, Laban Pickering and Simon Grobeler. The balance to the unnamed party to this agreement.

"The unnamed party," Hester murmured. "Now, that makes a strange document, Judge Reeves. He gets the lion's share, but you refuse to tell even me about him. Which means just one thing!"

She swung to her feet and bent toward him, her neck thrust out. "You're going to another sorcerer! You don't have complete confidence in me, and this unnamed man is the sorcerer. In that case, take your troubles to him now. Perhaps he'll cure the Pickering child."

"No, it's not that." Reeves' voice was a moan. "If you know who he is, others will know and he'll be sure one of the five named him. He'd be able to destroy us all, run us out of the country. I can't go that far."

"Why should you?" She placed the paper carelessly on the table. "Just have him go to the Pickering child and the matter'll be settled."

"He's not a sorcerer or a witch, I can tell you that."

"You would tell me that, I'm sure. Judge Reeves, my herbs need to be mixed and cooked, I've visits to make, so you'd better leave now."

"I can't." He twisted in the chair, desperately. "I'll tell you who he is, but I won't put it in writing. I won't do that for any reason! But I'll tell you if you'll promise to go to Laban's young one."

Hester considered, her eyes like bright needles on his face, her lips moving in their silent way. She nodded. "That will have to do. Who is he?"

"Eldrid Colerage. It was he who first worked things out—before asking us to go in with him. We really form the committee of condemnation and investigation, you know. He heads it."

Hester sat down again, abruptly. Eldrid Colerage, the richest man in all the settlements. The man who managed to control the financing of the community, who headed every important group, who owned more land and property than any other ten men.

"Why did he want Simon Grobeler in with him? Colerage and Grobeler!"

"Yes." Reeves nodded wearily. "He thought it would be wiser and safer. Grobeler, as the executioner, is sure to work with us if he gets a

share of the property as well as his fee."

"And he'll work harder to get confessions, too," Hester murmured. "For every witch you've managed to convict, you've sent six innocent women to the fire. Witches aren't easy to handle and as a rule they don't have so much money."

Judge Reeves was silent. He put his arms on the table and sat with his head loose and bowed upon his neck, while his fingers touched the edge of the red-written paper.

"You haven't finished," Hester said. "Add that you have told me these things, put them into writing, because you want me to cure Laban Pickering's child, for fear his conscience will drive him to expose you all."

He took up the quill once more, and when he had finished she thrust the paper into the folds of her ragged gown. "I'll go to the Pickerings', but, as you know, I've promised you nothing. Just that I'll go. It's possible that the demon in possession of the child is stronger than any I can summon."

"I don't believe that! You can do it, if you want to. Why, this witch, Margaret Cartevor, is a mere girl—she probably has learned only a little sorcery as yet."

"Any word of her? Didn't I hear that she had fled?"

"No word, but they'll find her. I don't believe her personal demon carried her away to save her."

"That would need a strong demon. Judge Reeves"—she caught his arm as he struggled into his coat—"there's one thing more. I want you to bring Eldrid Colerage here, to one of our fourteenth-night meetings."

He tore away from her. "No. No! Are you trying to back out of your bargain? I told you I'd not write his name and you agreed. Now, you're demanding more conditions."

"I'll keep my bargain, but I'd like him to come here."

"No," he repeated. "You'll never get me into anything like that. Why, Colerage would have us all arrested and burned—he's going to get rid of witchcraft if he has to destroy the whole community—stamping it out is the ambition of his life. If I were to bring him here—"

"Then never mind." Hester shrugged. "It's well for him that the insanity makes him rich."

Reeves started for the door, and as it opened, drew in a deep, hard breath of fresh air. Before he finished the first stride, he made a furtive, desperate gesture—the sign of the cross, which the custom of New England forbade!

When Hester left her house again, she carried two baskets, and her cane was hooked over her left arm so that it swung against her skirts. Her step was shuffling and her big shoes sent up puffs of dust which shimmered in the sunlight. But instead of turning toward Salem, she headed for the woods, slipped through them to the bramble field and the broken-roofed house. A white-faced, tearful-eyed Margaret greeted her, and she snapped: "Put those herb juices back on your face—this minute! I haven't time to do it myself."

"I can't—" The girl gulped down a sob. "This house and the gloom—and then seeing myself like that."

"You may see yourself a burnt corpse. I brought you food, but before you eat, fix your face. And if you don't"—Hester fixed her with narrowed, clear eyes which made the younger woman shrink—"I'll know it and I'll end the protection of the

"Schemkamphoras!" she shrieked. "Let her be healed!"

spirits I've placed around you. They'll desert you, and within twenty-four hours you'll be in prison."

Without waiting for a reply, she hurried off, almost running until she emerged from the woods, when she dropped into a cane-supported walk toward the town of Salem. As she neared the home of Laban Pickering, children stopped to stare and then moved silently after her, some of them clasping hands for protection against her. By the time she reached the door a score of them were approaching the house and she

turned with her wide, moist smile, waving her stick in greeting. They fell back, big-eyed and awed.

The door opened the moment her knock sounded and Laban Pickering said: "Come in, come in quickly—I wish you hadn't drawn a crowd of young ones like that. It'll go all over town."

She entered slowly, her gray glance on his thin, nervous face. He looked distracted and frightened, but even now tried to keep a good three feet of distance between them.

"Where is the child?" she asked.

"In here—this way. Prudy!" He stopped short, angrily, as he saw his wife. "I told you to stay out of this. Keep away!"

"I couldn't." The woman's taut face began to work painfully and she looked past him at Hester. "If you can help the little one, it won't mean—"

"Be still!" Pickering roared.

But Hester let her blue smile flicker once more and nodded. "It won't mean that she's bound over to Satan, if that's what you're trying to ask. Don't worry about it, but I've promised nothing. Until I see the child I don't know what I can do."

Laban Pickering jerked a hand toward the rear of the house. "Stay there until I call you, Prudy."

She turned hurriedly out of the room and Hester followed the man to the bedroom where a half-grown girl and an aged grandmother sat beside the sickbed. She glanced at the little face on the pillow and said: "I have to be alone with her."

"Alone? But—"

"That's what I said, but first bring me a basin of hot water."

The grandmother and girl stumbled hastily away and Pickering himself brought the hot water. Hester closed the door, put the basin of water on a table and took off her cape and hat. Then, from a pocket, she produced a bit of soap, and plunged her hands into the water. After that, she turned to the sickbed, kneeling down to peer into the face of the child. The tinge of the skin was blue and the eyes were half open, glazed with unconsciousness. Hester held the little wrist for a long moment and got up to rustle to the door, where she shouted at Pickering:

"Hurry. Bring me flannel. Warm flannel—hot. And then stay away from this door."

"What—are you going to do?"

"Nothing that's your business."

She went back to her basket, took out two jars and placed them on the outside of the sickroom door. She fumbled over them for a long time before succeeding in lighting them, when they flared up and sent out the smell of sulphur. Pickering, carrying hot cloths, grew even paler as he waded through the fumes, but once more Hester slammed the door in his face. Inside, she stuffed clothing under the door to keep out the sulphur smell and then placed two larger jars near the bed. These she also lighted, but the odor from them was that of pine. The pine smell grew until it thickened the air of the room, but its direct stream reached the face of the patient. Kneeling once more, she wrapped a hot flannel cloth about the neck of the sick child, and for half an hour she worked feverishly, changing cloths, chafing the child's wrists, lifting her head and chest high on the pillows, keeping the pine steam close.

Perspiration was rolling down her face when the youngster finally opened her eyes and tried to speak. She worked harder then, and finally

the child began to cry, protesting against the heat and unaccustomed smell.

She bent over the bed. "Be still now and close your eyes. Keep them closed until I tell you to open them. Do you understand?"

The child, suddenly frightened, nodded, and Hester rearranged the pillows, put out the pine steam and went to the door. "Well, come in," she said solemnly. "I've done all I can, but it will be a few minutes before I know what will happen. I will call upon the strongest of my spirits to drive out the one possessing her. Stand there"—pointing toward the wall—"and be still until I've finished."

PICKERING stumbled to the place indicated and Hester marched to the bed, held her hands high in a commanding gesture. "Master, I speak the Word—the Word you have reserved to raise the dead to life. Seldom have I used the Word, O Master, but now death is right beside me, claiming the child of Laban Pickering. So I call upon you and Your Word. I say it now, O Master, Schemkamphoras! Schemkamphoras!"

Her voice waxed full and took on a cellolike tone, driving power into the dread word. It rang through the room and in the stillness could be felt the fury of unseen powers, the awful straining between spirit and spirit.

Hester waited for a full minute. For two. Her hands were still held outward in that straight-armed gesture. Finally, she lowered them, stepped back from the bed and said: "Speak. Open your eyes and speak."

The child's lashes stirred, she whined and struggled against the pillows, and the floor shook as Laban Pickering dropped to his knees, sobbing.

"Well"—Hester was suddenly tired her shoulders drooping, and new lines were etched at the corners of her wide mouth—"it worked. But I wouldn't want to do it soon again, for I don't like to use the Word if I can help it."

Pickering pressed his broad hands against his face, and she picked up her cape, wrapped it around her shoulders, pulled on her old hat, filled her bag with the articles she had taken from it. "She'll be all right now if you're careful of her for a while. Keep her in bed."

"Wait . . . wait!" He got up, his hand uncertain as it plunged into a pocket, a little trickle of saliva moving from the corner of his mouth as the tears swept down from his eyes. "Here." He thrust a handful of gold coins at her. "What you've done is worth more than I can give you."

Hester accepted the money and tucked it into a corner of the basket. Nodding at him, she took up her old stick and opened the door. But he stopped her. "You're sure the child won't be marked by Satan? He won't try to claim her, later, because of your spirits or . because of . the Word?"

"I'm sure." She spoke wearily. "My powers are my own and the devil has no claim on the child."

"You'll promise, too, not to talk? I don't want anyone to know we used witchcraft to drive the evil spirits out of the little one. Only the power of prayer is allowed under the law. You won't—"

"You don't have to ask me that, but it seems you're concerned with a lot of things, now, where you thought only of saving the child when I arrived."

"But I have to know—"

"Hush—or the great spirit of Zabulon may hear you and regret what he did."

She opened the door and stepped into the hall where the women waited. At once, she glanced toward the mother. "Your child will live now."

"Live . . . you're sure? Oh, my God!" Mrs. Pickering staggered and clung to the back of a chair. "Forgive us if we did wrong; maybe we saved her at too great a price. What will become of us all, now, trafficking with the devil?"

Hester stared at her and the tired slump in her shoulders grew. She dribbled her cane forward and started after it, moving slowly out of the house.

The crowd of children before the door had grown, and there seemed to be a hundred small faces staring in terror. She waved at them and muttered something they could not hear, but they shrank back to give her room. It was only when she had turned down the street that one of the braver cried: "Did you save her life? Did you drive out the demon?"

The door of the Pickering house opened noisily and Laban shouted: "Begone, all of you. Hester Gurney did not come here to drive out the evil spirits—she was not even near the child. She only came to beg and we gave her food. The Christian gives food even to the servants of the devil. Now go home."

The woman paused in her slow, tired stride, and when the door had slammed shut, she chuckled. But the chuckle was deep and harsh as the strum of tuneless strings. "It might be interesting to know how much those young ones have already told and how the town is taking it," she told herself. "I think I'll find out."

She turned back, passing the Pickering house as she headed toward the market place, and within a few moments noticed the great number of people moving about the usually quiet streets of Salem. People whose faces looked strained and quiet; who drew aside without a greeting as she passed.

Near the market place she paused before a cutlery shop to watch the gathering crowds. Men were forming into groups and the common was filling rapidly. Children darted about, talking with shrill excitement, and women whispered, nodding their heads for emphasis.

The thickest of the crowd stirred and parted. And Hester saw that they were making way for Simon Grobeler. He was moving with leisurely strides, each step threatening to shake the ground, and his heavy face looked as if it had no eyes at all, but only great black brows. Even now, he was hatless, and his head seemed to give off the fire of the sun. A thin, nervous citizen stopped him and he leaned backward as he talked, one hand rubbing the middle of his leather jacket.

Hester chuckled silently, her lips contorting, and someone spoke from the doorway behind her. "Move on. Don't stay here, where your kind isn't wanted."

She did not turn at once, but when she did her neck thrust out so that her yellowish face seemed to bobble in the air. The man in the doorway held his ground. "We've heard enough of you this time, I guess. The word of God won't be flouted any longer. Begone, or you'll be taken to the fire before your time."

"I won't go to the fire, old man." She spoke evenly and for once her voice was not shrill. "That is written. Many others will go, but not myself. See—" She straightened

with a sudden laugh, for she had glimpsed Judge Thurlow Reeves moving down the narrow walk. "Ask the honorable gentleman there. Judge Reeves!"

He lost color as he came toward her, but he removed his hat and listened to her before he turned on the shopkeeper. "Don't talk such nonsense. Hester Gurney has never been considered a witch and you know it. Now be still or you'll cause trouble."

He hurried on as soon as the last word was spoken; and Hester laughed more loudly. But she left the front of the store, walking in the direction which Reeves had taken, moving her stick out before her as if it were leading the way. When she heard the heavily thudding steps behind her, she recognized them, but gave no sign until Simon Grobeler fell into stride with her.

"It's you," she said.

He strode on, beside her, in silence. They were nearing the edge of town and she could see the marshy land where her cabin stood. She straightened until the stoop was entirely gone from her shoulders and shot a narrow-lidded glance at the giant. "You're getting no help from me today, Sim, no matter what your worries may be."

He scowled. "The charm you gave me to conquer the witch's demon didn't work. She wouldn't confess even at the last."

"So she went to the scaffold, anyhow."

He shook his great head and his walk became a little more swaying. "We decided to give her the trial by water. She sank and before we could get her out she was dead."

Hester snorted. "An easier death than fire, anyhow. Well, that's off your mind—except, of course, you didn't get the fee! I forgot about that, but maybe they'll give you an extra share of her property."

He stopped short. "What does that mean?"

Hester shrugged and continued walking. "I naturally thought you'd get part of any witch's confiscated estate. It's usually done that way in this part of the world, isn't it?"

HE PLODDED after her and they moved in silence with Hester feeling his glance shifting over her. Near her house, he paused, planting his feet against the earth. "You saw the crowds in town—" he said, his voice mumbling. "Hester, they were talking about you, saying that no accusation is ever made against you, although you're the worst witch of all."

"Well?" She pushed her cane out and leaned on it.

"They're saying that you brought the Pickering child back from death by using sorcery and calling on the familiar spirits you command. They say your price was—the young one's soul, that from now on it's the devil's property."

She considered his gross face and peered into the little, almost invisible eyes. But it was his loose, working mouth which told her what she wanted to know.

"What 'they' say doesn't matter to me, Simon. I'll leave you here, since I'm almost home."

"You'd better be bothered. I wanted to warn you, but you're a hard one to do anything with, Hester. It won't be long now before you'll be put to the trial."

"What makes you think that?"

He waggled his great head. "I know. The word has been given."

"The word." She laughed. "It is I who say the Word—but not the same word. Good night, Sim."

"Not yet—" Suddenly he swayed

forward—he who never touched her—and caught her shoulders, one hand dropping swiftly down over the side folds of her cape. "You'd better listen!"

Her yellow fingers tightened on the stick and it swept up, catching him full in the chest, its pointed tip digging deep. Surprised, he staggered off balance and almost fell. She moved after him, her face twisted so that the lines on it were deep as grooves and her wide, moist mouth contorted. "You fool! To think you could do that to me!"

Straightening, her burningly bright eyes holding his, she put her hand inside the folds of her cape and brought out a tangle of thread and a tuft of golden hair which glinted in the light. Holding it up to him, she laughed. Her laughter grew until her frame shook with it, but not once did her gaze move away from his, for she was holding him before her, willing him to remain still and dumb with terror.

"Look at what you put into my clothing, you simple clown! A thing like that! So you went to another sorcerer—and this is the death charm they gave you to use on me! As if a weak thing like this could have any effect on Hester Gurney! Why, it's a bit of child's play which I learned before I cut my second teeth—so foolish that even the weak air spirits will not obey its summons."

Grobeler did not move. His tiny eyes were widening and his shaggy brows lifting in terror. His great frame was shaking and he moved as if to drop to his knees, but she snapped: "Stand where you are!"

Moisture appeared on his face, but he did not lift his hand to wipe it away and she continued more softly: "Now, tell me the truth or it will be you on whom the death charm works. You decided I knew too much and wanted me out of the way. You went to another witch who gave you this charm which was supposed to kill me or cause my arrest as a sorcerer."

His huge body was weaving in spite of his spread legs and planted feet. His loose mouth worked wetly, but when she shrilled, "Answer me!" he nodded.

"It wasn't my idea—I wasn't afraid of your knowing too much. I trusted you, Hester, I did, I swear. It was—"

"Who?"

"Thurlow Reeves. He told me you were going crazy—thinking you had so much power you could order us all around—that you might cause our deaths. He sent me to the witch and I got this charm which she said would make you drop dead the moment you touched it."

"I see." She held the charm up and, puckering her lips, spat upon it. "So it was Thurlow Reeves who wanted to get rid of me. He told you, I suppose, not to place the charm on me until the Pickering child was cured."

Grobeler nodded. "He said the best time would be as you went home from the Pickerings'."

Hester dropped the charm to the earth and ground her heel into it. "I'll look after Reeves later, Simon, but now I'm going to teach you a lesson."

"I tell you I didn't want to do it—I only obeyed the judge."

"Shut up! You'll take your lesson now, and the lesson will destroy the power of the other witch for all time. If you were ever to go back to her you would find her a screaming, babbling old woman who could help nor harm no one. Watch—"

She ran her hands upward beneath her cape, swept them downward over the lid of the basket she

carried upon her arm and then shot her arms stiffly toward heaven, closing one palm as she did so. The closed hand burst into flame. A flame that leaped and spread until it danced a foot on either side of the woman's hand. A blue, cold flame which did not belong to the world of the living. Slowly, holding her hand aloft, Hester advanced toward Simon, the executioner. He returned but only a step at a time. A stumbling, frantic step—while the eerie light, blue, clear and cold, came ever closer.

"Don't, don't!" he screamed so that his voice burst into falsetto and tried to take another step backward, but missed his footing and fell. Groveling there, he lifted his hands to her. "In God's name, don't—"

Saliva flecked his cheeks and his little eyes stopped staring to roll aimlessly in their sockets. But Hester bent lower with the blue flame. He gasped and sagged limply onto the earth, completely unconscious.

She stood up, then, with a small guttural exclamation of disgust and, lifting a corner of her cape, passed it over her hand, wiping out the phosphorescent flame. Then she picked up her basket and started for the cottage near the marsh with its sinister cattail flags. She moved with the intentness of the very tired and thought nothing of the faint rustle of brush close to her own doorstep. But, as she moved past, a man stepped out into the clearing and halted her as abruptly as if he had seized her in his hands.

She could hear her own startled gasp and turned it into a dry laugh.

"You might give an old woman warning," she said coyly. "If I'd expected anyone so handsome and young, I'd have been ready. Well, at least, I'd have sort of fixed up a bit. Or maybe you're just lost in the strange country?"

He stood very straight and scowled. A finely dressed, finely made young man with chestnut hair which glinted in the light. Eyes as gray as those of Hester and a chin with a sharp, angry cleft marking its center. "You know who I am, so let's not play games."

She started back in pretended fear. "Indeed, I don't know any young man who roars and threatens an old woman. Begone from my home, sir—begone!"

He laughed. A laugh of ringing anger. "Hester Gurney, you can save that for the thing you left lying helpless on the ground a little while ago."

"Hm-m-m." Her glance played over him again and she nodded matter-of-factly. "I'll do that for the present, lad. I've always said you were ten times the man your father is. But here we are at my doorstep and I'm tired. We'll sit on the step—unless you're afraid to sit beside me?"

He sat down grinning. "The only people over whom you have control are those whose brains were lost before they knew you. My father's told me all about you and says you're no more sorcerer than any nice old grandmother who's lived alone too long. You like to make yourself interesting."

"Do I, indeed?" She smiled into his face. "Well, young Jared Reeves, most people consider your father a bright man, so maybe he's right, but in that case what makes you steal around my house and jump out at me from the bushes?"

"I didn't steal around—I just walked. Hester"—he sat straight and looked down into her eyes—"I'm sick of what's going on in this community. And I'm not the only

one. We've decided that every witch must go—every one, young or old. The depraved things who work for the devil, injure little children, kill cattle and cast sicknesses on whole households can't be permitted to live a minute longer than necessary. So we're rounding them up—and we'll get them."

"We? Who might the others be? Your father?"

"No. His crowd has had plenty of time to handle things and they've muddled the business. Now, a dozen of the younger men have formed a committee to hunt down the witches—we'll go after them as hard as we would track down a murderer and bring them in. After we get through, there'll be no more terror, no more stricken children and —no more burning scaffolds. We can forget the nightmare and hope those who come after us will never know about it."

Hester considered the toes of her huge, shapeless shoes which were peering out from the ragged edges of her skirts. "So you come to me. That's peculiar, Jared. Do you expect me to help you?"

"Yes," he snapped. "You know where the witch, Margaret Cartevor, is. Abel Meredith told us he had driven you to her house after you left Duck Acre. He said you hurried away ahead of the crowd at the execution and went to see her. When the soldiers reached her home she was gone and hasn't been seen since. You know where she is, but we're not accusing you of anything. We won't even punish you for harboring or hiding her if you'll turn her over to justice."

"Abel Meredith is a lying fool." Hester spoke slowly and wearily. "I haven't seen Margaret Cartevor since long before the day she was named from the scaffold. This committee of yours had better not believe every tale they hear, especially from people like Meredith. Wasn't his own aunt burned as a witch? Usually the families of witches know a bit too much about things that are best left unlearned."

"That's not true in this case. I believe him. I know he was telling the truth, and I know that you're hiding the witch—I'm sure of it. There's no other explanation."

Hester grunted and, pushing her cane into position, got to her feet. "Good day, young man, and tell your father I'll see him soon. Unless, of course, you want to come in and search my house for witches. You've no right or authority to do that, but if you wish I will allow it and discuss it later with Judge Reeves."

Young Jared, also on his feet, flushed angrily. "I'm not trying to force my way into your home to search it. If I feel that's necessary, I'll get the proper authorization. My father has nothing to do with this."

"Well, he might be interested. But since you won't come in, I'll leave you to your witch hunting. Good night, Jared—"

But she stopped with her stick half lifted in the air, for the door of her cottage was opening. She heard Jared Reeves' quick breathing as he stared at that opening door. And then Margaret Cartevor came out, smiling almost gayly. Margaret Cartevor—without a trace of disguise. Even her hair was brushed and carefully arranged. "I'm so glad you came, Hester," she called. "I've been waiting a long time."

Hester's rigid, shocked stillness made her aware of the man, then, and she looked at him with her face twisting into terror.

Jared Reeves started to mount the steps. "Margaret Cartevor, you are

charged with the practice of witchcraft and sorcery. In the name of the law, I am placing you under arrest."

MARGARET CARTEVOR, standing in the doorway, seemed unable to look away from Jared Reeves. Her cheeks lost all glow and her deep, dark eyes appeared dead. "I'm not a witch. That was a crazy, vicious lie! Why should people believe a woman who was trying to save herself from the fire? She said the first name that came to her. I—"

Jared marched solemnly up the step. "If you are innocent you can prove it. As a citizen of Salem I must place you under arrest."

Hester had not moved. She stood with her stick still lifted, her face frozen in the expression it had held as Margaret appeared. She saw the tall, fine-looking young man moving toward the lovely, frightened girl—and then she stirred to life.

"Wait, Jared; I can explain. You mustn't connect me with her—must not blame me because she's here. I'll tell you how it happened. Wait!"

Margaret tore her glance from the man, looked at Hester with all her young, shocked soul in her eyes. "You . . . you—" The words turned into a choking moan and she reeled, falling at Jared Reeves' feet. He stood stiffly above her, his face pale and set.

"Pick her up!" Hester shrilled. "Pick her up, you zany. Touching the girl won't hurt you. Take her inside."

Reeves knelt to lift Margaret into his arms, and as Hester opened the door he looked down into the unconscious face. "It's too bad! She's so beautiful."

"Bring her in here, quickly. Put her down over there—" She pointed to a chair and ran to the kitchen for a dark, mysterious bottle from which she filled a tiny glass. Holding it to the girl's lips, she snapped: "Go out and start a kettle boiling—we'll have to take care of her; she's pretty sick."

Jared Reeves hesitated, scowling and uneasy, but he strode into the kitchen and began to rattle pans. Margaret's eyes opened and, as memory returned, she shrank back into the chair. "Let me alone, you—"

Hester's clawlike fingers dug into her shoulder and she whispered: "Keep still and do exactly what I say. When he comes back, faint again. No matter what I say, keep still."

Reeves' footsteps thudded onto the living-room floor. "The water's about boiling. Shall I bring it in here?"

"Yes. Put the kettle on the table—and hurry."

She pushed the girl farther down in the chair, got a cup and saucer and put them on the table. From a chest, she took an odd-looking jar, and when Reeves returned with the kettle she told him: "This'll bring anyone back to life, and that's no story. I'm fixing some of it for her so she'll be strong enough to go with you. I want no hunted witches around my place. If they can't be like me—too smart to get in trouble—then they can look after themselves without trying to send me to the fire with them."

Reeves sat down on the edge of a chair to watch her crumble herb leaves into a cup and pour the hot water on top of them. The herb leaves were dried cannabis sativa, and she put only a few bits into the dish. "Now." She held the cup against the girl's lips, shook her into response. "Drink!"

Margaret gulped down some of

the vile, hot mixture and Hester smiled grimacingly at young Reeves. "That'll bring her around, all right. Good thing I'm not giving it to you, but then I couldn't very well do that, could I? You'd be afraid to touch anything I prepared or had in this house, wouldn't you? Afraid the witch, Hester Gurney, would ruin you."

He made an impatient gesture. "Let's forget that nonsense. I'd be afraid of nothing you gave me. The stuff she's drinking is probably no more than some kind of tea."

"So you wouldn't be afraid?" She leaned toward him, peering into his eyes. "I don't believe that, my boy! I think you're praying right now as you sit before me."

He shot to his feet. "For Heaven's sake, stop it. You haven't fooled me or anyone else who has a speck of brains."

"Hm-m-m. Then we'll see, Jared, my boy. I'll just fix you some—and wager whatever you wish that you won't drink it."

"Wager?" He laughed and sat down again. "What would you wager, mother? Your clothes?"

"No." She shook her head. "I've no money, you're right on that—but there's the girl, this witch in the chair before us. If you're not afraid to drink, she goes along with you. If you are afraid, she's free to leave here alone."

"You're a silly old woman and I don't have to ask your permission to take her in. I've arrested her and don't intend to let her out of my sight until she's in prison, but fix me a cup of your magic. If it doesn't taste too awful, I'll drink it."

"Oh, that's part of the bargain. You must finish all of it."

"All right." He grinned. "Go ahead."

Hester returned his grin, and in spite of himself he shoved his chair back, for in the dim light of the room she looked like a great, weird-faced bird. Quickly, she rubbed the herbs into the cup, a generous portion this time, and added the hot water. "Now," she said, "drink or lose your wager, young man."

He accepted the cup, and at the first taste his face twisted with disgust. "It tastes like old boots—you wouldn't ask an animal to drink the stuff!"

"You made a bargain," she cackled.

He nodded, lifted the cup again and drained it swiftly, choking over the last of it. "There you are, and now I'll take her back with me."

He got up and approached Margaret Cartevor's chair, but the girl was still inert and limp, so that he paused, scowling. "I thought you said that stuff would bring her to? I can't carry her all the way to town, and if I go back for help, she may be gone when I return—I don't trust you to keep your word."

"Master Reeves, your father would reprove you for speaking like that to an old woman, and you can just take the girl along with you now, conscious or not. I want no part of a hunted witch, for she might name me to save herself."

Jared still scowled, but a startled expression spread over his face and a flush appeared on his cheeks. The flush spread toward his eyes and he put a hand on the table to steady himself. "This place makes me dizzy—" he said thickly. "Close as a grave in here—"

"Sit down and it will pass."

"No." He shook his head, but his voice was even thicker and his eyes were becoming too bright, glassy. "Hester Gurney, I believe you—"

"Sit down." She took his arm and pushed him into a chair. He slumped there, his eyes on her face, the thick, ugly flush growing more violent. He tried to speak, but only blurred sounds came from his lips. His eyes closed and he relaxed to a heavy-breathed sleep.

"Come on," Hester snapped at Margaret. "We've got to hurry."

SHE PULLED the girl to her feet and across to the bedroom, where she placed bottles and jars on the table with vicious little slams. "If you take this off again, I'm through with you. It's just your worthless vanity that makes you want to look at your own face." Swiftly, she rubbed the stain over the girl's skin, over her hands, applied a liquid which scarred one cheek and twisted her mouth, tousled her hair, tied up her head in a rag.

"I swear this is the very last time I'll bother with you. One of these days you may send me to the scaffold along with yourself. Now, no nonsense."

She led the way out of the house, sped with the girl through the woods to the edge of the bramble field where she said: "You can go the rest of the way yourself—and see that you don't stop until you're inside. Stay out of sight."

"Yes." Margaret nodded. "Hester, you're you're not a witch, but—"

She interrupted fiercely: "I'm not? After you saw I could transform my own body? That I could put young Reeves to sleep? Be still or my familiar spirits will get restless with your silly talk and I'll have trouble handling them. Now go—"

The girl dived into the brambles and Hester turned toward Salem, moving swiftly until she reached the house of Judge Thurlow Reeves. A servant girl opened the door and at the sight of Hester whirled toward the rear of the house uttering shrill sounds. Hester entered the hall and paced calmly into the living room, where she seated herself in the softest chair in the room. But Judge Reeves appeared at once, his face paper-white and his eyes fierce. "Why did you come here?" he demanded. "Are you crazy, to come directly to my house in broad daylight? You—"

"Stop shouting or everybody in the house will hear you. I have something to show you. If you'll come with me you may—avoid trouble."

"What have you done now? If you've cooked up some trick, you'll regret it. This is presuming too far and I'll have to bring you to a halt."

She got up and swayed toward him, her face seeming to bobble on the end of her outthrust neck, as she whispered: "Maybe you'd like to know that your son, Jared, has become interested in sorcery—wants to join one of my circles. He said if I refused to take him he would find someone who would."

"You're lying."

She shrugged. "He's at my place now. I knew how you'd feel about your own son getting mixed up with witches, standing in danger of the scaffold, so I—well, I made him a bit of tea which put him to sleep. If you don't believe me, you can come and look for yourself."

The glowing fierceness of his eyes burned against her face. "I certainly will, and after that we'll have an understanding. Because of . because of certain things, you're beginning to embarrass me, actually endanger me, and it can't go on."

"Are you ready to come with me?"

"Yes, certainly! But wait—you leave first and I'll follow in a few

minutes. Can't be seen leaving together."

Hester grinned. "I thought you'd want it that way. I'll expect you soon."

BACK in her little house, she sat and contemplated the unconscious youth, who, sprawled helplessly in a chair, was muttering and writhing. He was a handsome boy, not unlike Esiah Gurney had been as a youth—a dreamer, too, even though his dreams took the form of saving the world from sorcery, whereas Esiah had dreamed of healing humanity.

She heard the feet on the steps and picked up her stick before going to answer. Judge Reeves was still white-faced and smoky-eyed as he came into the room, but a single glance seemed to crumple his whole body. He stared at the unconscious boy and his head drooped, his tall frame seemed to lose shape. He crossed the floor and knelt beside Jared, took his hand, speaking to him almost sobbingly. The boy merely groaned and muttered, sinking deeper into coma. Reeves shook him violently, but his son's body was limp, and the man sank down beside him to sob. Sob as a heartbroken woman might have done.

"If I'd ever dreamed this could happen! My boy, my own son! It was like this you sent me to the Witches' Sabbath, so I know—I know. He may come out of this with the mark on him. It's a judgment on me! Curse the day I ever consented to traffic with you, Hester Gurney! Curse the breath which made me promise to come to your house!"

Hester watched him silently. "Well, it's done, so groaning won't help you."

Fury returned to him and he sprang up, whirling on her threateningly. "It's not done! This one bit of madness can't curse my son forever—I won't let it! I'll see that nothing like this ever happens again if I have to stay with him during every waking moment. He'll never be near you or anyone like you. I'll make him repent and promise; I'll do penance, too, for the sin that was mine—mine, not his."

"Maybe you'll win."

"Maybe? I will!"

"Hm-m-m." She considered, looking up at him. "But you know what it means to give a dog a bad name. Now that he's taken the devil's drug, do you think it will remain unknown? Even if it leaves no effect on him, don't you realize people will find out somehow—will whisper and talk until he's driven into the company of sorcerers because no others will have him?"

"There's only one person who could let out the story of what's happened, and that's you. But you won't, Hester. One word from you about my son and I'll send you to the scaffold. I've more than enough proof and I'll have you burning within two days. You're to stay away from him and keep your mouth sealed as long as you live!"

SHE LEANED back in her chair and let the loose, moist smile flicker over her blue lips. "It sounds all right as you say it, Judge Reeves, but you know how these things are—the wind seems to carry news of witches' doings—the very trees know who goes and comes. If you accused me as a witch, you'd go to the scaffold with me—once that red mark on your neck was found."

He stepped back, felt for a chair and dropped into it. "God, you are really a demon! It would have been better to let my young one die than

to have condemned my whole family."

"I wouldn't say that, yet. Maybe you can still save your son and keep what's happened secret. Maybe—"

"How?" He leaned forward, his gaunt face glistening with sweat. "How—by another bargain with hell?"

"No. I could arrange it, if you'd do a favor for me in return."

His lips twitched. "What favor? What damnable scheme have you cooked up now?"

"Nothing that would bother you. Tomorrow is the fourteenth night, the night you come to the circle. I want you to bring Nathan Banks and Uriah Hale with you."

He stared at her. "Why do you want them? You mention two of the names I gave you the other day —why?"

"I can't handle more. Just now, I want Hale and Banks."

He considered, staring as if he were trying to read the darkness of her mind, and the sweat glistened even more brightly on his pallid forehead. "If I bring them, then no one will ever know Jared came to learn of the Witches' Sabbath? You'll never allow him in your house again?"

"That's what I meant."

"All right." His voice was almost eager. "I'll bring them. But if you don't keep your bargain—"

"Have I ever failed to keep a bargain?" she demanded.

"No-o."

"But you have, so be sure on this one. Which reminds me Simon Grobeler probably won't be feeling so well the next time you see him. The fool got a death charm from some would-be witch and placed it in my clothing—thought he'd kill me. He was in a faint when I left him."

"Do you mean that you—"

"Oh, no." She broke in with a light, dry scrap of laughter. "He'll recover, but he won't try any more tricks on me. Stupid of the person who gave him the idea, wasn't it?"

"Ye-es."

"Now, then, about the boy. How will you get him home?"

"It's certain I can't carry him through the streets, so I'll have to wait here until he's conscious."

"All right. I'll leave you alone with him, and if anyone should come to the door, just don't answer. And don't forget that Banks and Hale are coming to the fourteenth night."

She got up, pulled on her old cape and hat, catching up her stick as she shuffled toward the door. But there she paused, for Jared Reeves was saying loudly, from the depths of his drugged sleep: "Margaret Cartevor, you are a witch—an accused witch, but how beautiful you are! Like morning."

Hester looked sharply at the flushed face before she went out and softly shut the door behind her.

HESTER had her house ready for the ceremony of the fourteenth night. A fire burned low in the hearth and, except for a single sperm candle standing on a table which had been set in the middle of the floor, the room was in darkness. A heavy curtain covered the entrance to the bedroom and the opening into the kitchen was closed. At a little before twelve they would start to come —the members of the fourteenth-night circle. One by one they would slip across the stretch of marshy land and pound nervously on the door.

The members of the fourteenth night were people who could not be expected to accept Simon Grobeler or his type on an equal footing, for they were the leading men of the

The Judge knelt beside Jared as the boy sank deeper into a coma

community; men of family, position and place. Some of them came for protection from business and political enemies, some because they coveted the power of sorcery which would allow them to outdo their as-

sociates. A few, like Thurlow Reeves, attended because in a moment of desperate need they had sought her services as a sorceress and since then had been afraid to remain away.

Hester wore neither her customary cape nor hat, and her aged dress was less tattered than usual. But her clay-colored hair spilled about her head in dirty disarray, and her face seemed more than ever like that of a hungry, preying bird.

She sat quietly at the window until she saw the first figure hurrying toward the house. Before the man could knock, she opened the door and leered up at him out of the gloom. "Come in, Mr. Calvert."

He slipped into the room, felt his way to a chair and sank into it. Neither he nor Hester spoke while they waited for the others, who arrived at short intervals until eight men were gathered in the little room.

"We are not yet ready." She spoke eerily into the moving shadows which were depened by the light of the single flickering candle. We are waiting for three more, who must come soon if they are to be here at the twelfth hour."

The men remained silent, stiffly erect in their chairs, while Hester returned to the window. Thurlow Reeves had promised to bring Banks and Hale with him. If he failed—There was someone now. A tall, nervously striding figure. Reeves, and behind him were two equally hasty men.

She let them in and the judge whispered: "I have taken the liberty of bringing some friends, Hester. Nathan Banks and Uriah Hale. Will you allow them—to join us?"

"I'm always glad to have friends of yours, Judge Reeves. Now, if you gentlemen will close the door and come closer to the fire; the twelfth hour will strike in one moment."

They rustled and creaked into chairs, and for seconds there was only the sound of their quick, excited breath. Hester waited until there was absolute stillness before she moved to the table in the middle of the room. Two shining, dark containers seemed to come from nowhere into her hands and she placed them solemnly in the circle of candlelight. Thrusting up her arms, she raised the palms toward the ceiling and remained taut, straining. Significantly, she lowered her hands, took up the candle and touched the flame to the tops of the shining containers. Instantly a wavering, cold light flared up, illuminating the room without revealing it. She stared across the flame at the men, and her yellow face seemed to glow, her gray eyes grew larger, became as coldly bright as the dancing flame.

She began to speak, slowly, solemnly, and her voice was deep, bell-like music, with no semblance to Hester Gurney's usual tones. "Abi per Diabolum," she said firmly. "Abi per Diabolum. Cast out all who are unfaithful to us. Mark the weak with the unfailing mark so that they shall be known. Enoch, father of Methuselah, whose love for a sorcerer made him one of us; Pharaoh and Nebuchadnezzar, willing slaves to witch wives, join us in paying tribute to the master. Zabulon, we wait!"

Once more she lifted her hands, and then, dropping them, busied herself with two plates of fowl, prepared for cooking. The plates and the fowl had materialized out of the shadows. Now, she held the plates above the flame for a few moments, put them back on the table—and the fowl was cooked to a golden brown. Solemnly

she carried them to the waiting men, who each chose a piece of the meat and held it gingerly in his fingers.

"Now," she said, once more behind the bluish, cold light. "Eat. Eat of the sacrificial meat."

A gasp broke the heavy stillness. "Sacrificial meat! That means joining—"

"Be still. The demon servants of Zabulon mark those who interrupt his ceremonies. Eat."

The men ate slowly while she prepared cups of steaming liquid and placed them on trays. But before serving the liquid she passed from man to man, carrying a large earthen jar. Thrusting her long fingers into it, she dabbed each forehead with a thick, greasy oil. "The unguent of the great Zabulon. The unguent which brings joy and relief to all his faithful workers."

Quickly, then, she gave them the steaming cups of liquid. Most of them coughed as they started to drink, but at her command forced the rest of the stuff down their revolted throats.

"Listen once more." Her voice was deeper, more bell-like than ever. "In a few moments the servants of Zabulon will transport you to the greatest of all feasts—the Sabbath—where you will see the devil himself receiving in all the glory of his court. Be startled at nothing you may see or hear and do not be afraid. Usually, he appears in the form of a great black goat who dances to wild, beautiful music. After that his handmaidens will entertain you with more dancing and to end the occasion there will be such food and drink as mortal man has never tasted. Soon—very soon—you will ride through the night to that place which no human can find. Wait quietly now."

Someone uttered a strangled cough. Another man sighed deeply, and then, abruptly, came the sound of a harsh snore. The breathing of all became louder, turned into rasping wheezes, and Hester lifted the candle to walk close to them. All eleven were completely unconscious, sunk in a deep, troubled, drugged sleep.

She put out the candle and went softly to the door of the bedroom, pulling the curtain carefully back into place as she entered. Inside, she lighted a whale-oil lamp and undressed, putting on a heavy, crisply starched linen nightgown, combing her clay-colored hair to smoothness. When she got into bed and put out the light, she sighed deeply, but the sigh was echoed by a faint, deep chuckle. After that she slept soundly.

AT DAWN she stirred and was instantly wide awake. With quick, neat movements she got up and struggled into ragged, stained garments, thrust her uncombed hair back from her face and pushed her feet into the grotesque shoes. Opening the door, she pulled aside the curtain and aroused the sleeping men.

"You fools, it's daylight—people will see you coming from here! What are you going to do? Get up, get up!"

They sat up, eyes glazed and red-lidded, loose mouths working. They stared at her blankly, unbelievingly, and Uriah Hale laughed shrilly as a drunkard. "The Black Goat dances again to his own music. Hail, Black Goat! Hail, master of gaiety!"

Hester darted toward him and clamped a hand over his mouth. "You fool—someone might hear. If all of you don't pull yourselves together right now, you'll be sorry."

She backed away from them and,

as they weaved to their feet, snapped: "Wait. You can't all leave together. Besides, there are some things I want to take up with Judge Reeves and his friends. The rest of you can go now, but separate at once and don't return to Salem together."

Thurlow Reeves, Nathan Banks and Uriah Hale looked at each other uncertainly and then sank back into their chairs. The judge passed a shaking hand over his face. He was gray-skinned, bleary-eyed and dishevelled, as though he had been on an exhausting debauch. The others did not pause, but sped out of the house and ran for the open, where they scattered—creatures flying from their own fears. Hester looked after them for a long moment before she confronted the three still waiting in her living room.

"Well, gentlemen." Her blue lips smacked over the words and she walked deliberately to a chair. "It isn't everyone who's allowed to attend the Sabbath. How did you like it?"

Reeves' head sagged and Hale shuddered. Banks, meeting her sharp gray gaze, moved violently. "It was horrible. I didn't want to come last night, but the judge insisted. As long as I live I'll never forget seeing that ghastly black goat prancing in his jeweled throne room, demanding homage from everyone. Now I want to get away from this place as fast as I can, and you'll never see me come back. I knew last night—why, as we came in, I saw a shadow lying over this house. A shadow caused by nothing, I tell you. Let me get out!"

He sprang to his feet, but Hester was suddenly standing in his way, her stick thrust forward to keep a space between them. "Sit down, Mr. Banks. Remember that you attended the Sabbath—all of you—and anyone who attends the Sabbath is marked. Oh, yes, you know the mark I mean—the little red line which will not bleed when it's pricked or cut. Zabulon himself puts it there—"

All three men were on their feet, staring, dry mouths gaping. She laughed at them. "Don't bother looking for the mark now, because you can't find it. It may not appear for six hours—sometimes days go by before it shows. But—it always appears sooner or later. Even then you may not be able to see it, for it's never in the same place. Occasionally, it comes on the head, under the hair; at other times in an armpit or on the back. Anywhere. And sometimes"—her voice thinned so that it sounded as if she were laughing again—"instead of being a thin red line it is a bigger mark—the sign of a hare's foot impressed upon the skin."

Reeves spoke harshly, his voice commanding, as if he were ordering the others to silence. "What do you want, Hester? This whole thing was planned for a purpose, so what do you want of us?"

"Uriah Hale and Nathan Banks are to make a statement in writing that they are members of the—committee to which you and several others belong, the committee which divides the confiscated estates of condemned witches. "Wait!"—as he started into explosive speech. "They are also to put into writing that they attended the Sabbath here tonight."

Hale plunged for her, hurtling forward with his hands lifting to her throat. She eluded him easily, swaying aside with the agility of a girl, and Reeves caught his arms.

"Don't stop me! You brought me here to this bit of hell—and that

woman is a demon who needs killing. I'll kill her with my hands before I'll let her destroy my life."

"Hush, man!" Reeves growled. "Losing your head is what will destroy you—stop!"

Panting, Hale subsided, but his glaring, fearful eyes still poured hate at Hester. "Get me out of here if you don't want her harmed."

"You'll get out in good time," the woman murmured. "You couldn't kill a witch like that, and trying might mean that everyone will find out what you and your friends are doing—how you are stealing confiscated estates which are supposed to be turned over to the community government. Besides, Zabulon has more power over you now that you have gone to the Sabbath, and an outburst like this might anger him so that he'd make the red hare's foot appear on your cheek."

"Hester," Reeves pleaded—he and Banks were still holding Hale between them—"in the name of God, get through with this business so that we can go."

"Certainly." She nodded and told Banks: "Come to the table and take off your coat."

Rolling up his sleeve, she drew out a little blood, put it into the glass dish and then approached Hale, telling Reeves: "Make him be quiet about it, for it's your responsibility."

But Hale had slumped, terror and hysteria making him limp, and Reeves lowered him into a chair so that Hester had no difficulty in extracting blood from his arm. After adding a few drops of her own blood, she thrust the shiny quill into Banks' hand and told him: "Write as I direct. Name your associates in the group which is taking over witches' property. Sign it."

When he had finished, she gave the quill to Hale, who was docile now, like a fright-numbed child. He wrote steadily and signed his name carefully before putting down the pen.

Hester read both statements swiftly and scowled up at Judge Reeves. "There's no mention here of Eldrid Colerage—neither one of them wrote his name, although they gave the names of all the others. You know that he's one of you—that he's your master. I want that, too. Want it written plainly."

But Reeves' gaunt body straightened into rigidity and his gray face took on the lines of a mask. "There's no way you can make any of us do that. You and your lord, the devil, might make us betray our own familes, but—" He stopped and shook his head. "Eldrid Colerage wouldn't permit any of us to be free for one hour after he found out. More than that, our families would be stripped of everything and driven from the community."

"So he's that powerful? You're that much afraid of him?"

"It's not fear. Just common sense. Eldrid Colerage has more power than any royal governor would have. He's made us what we are, given us the positions we hold. At his word we would lose them along with our lives."

She hesitated, glancing at the other two men and suddenly looking back at Judge Reeves. "A craven lot—the highest of you! Well, I'll take what I can get."

Picking up the red-scrawled sheets, she folded them and put them into the folds of her dress. "Get out now. I'm sick of the sight of you."

THE DOOR snapped smartly after them and, surveying the disordered room, Hester hurriedly pushed up the windows and began to clean the hearth. But, as she knelt, the door

swung open again, too softly. She twisted about and met the glass-shielded fire of Judge Reeves' eyes.

He stalked toward her without speaking and she let her flickering smile show at its widest. "Simon Grobeler was tired of me, too—and he got a death charm to be rid of me. Poor Simon."

Reeves slumped into a chair. "I didn't come back to talk about the executioner. Hester, Jared told me yesterday, when he was fully recovered, that you tricked him. He swears you made him drink something which put him to sleep while you got the witch, Margaret Cartevor, out of the way."

Hester stood. "I've never known anyone who went to the Sabbath—or tried to—who didn't have an elaborate story to tell. They were either sick or tricked or deceived. What difference does it make—after it happens?"

Reeves sat forward furiously. "Nothing happened to my son—nothing! You promised me that—"

"I know what I promised, so stop shouting. You came back to tell me the lad had no intention of studying sorcery but was tricked into unconsciousness. Can he give any proof that he *wasn't* at the Witches' Sabbath or some place like it?"

"Proof?" His voice was almost a shout. "How could he—" But his words broke off and his hand went awkwardly to the side of his neck, felt up under the hair line. And then, realizing Hester's hard, bright scrutiny, he flushed violently. "Never mind that. I came to ask you to turn over the witch, Margaret Cartevor, to the authorities because the boy says he won't stop hunting her, that he's determined to find her. I'm just as determined he'll have no more contact of any kind with sorceresses. If she were in prison, the hunt would be ended."

"Oh, no. He'd just start searching for another one. It's a peculiar thing that witch hunting seems to run in your family, so to speak. You are often on the committee which condemns them to death and always one to share in their property. Now your son is trying to end all witches and witchcraft."

"Then you won't give Margaret Cartevor up to the authorities?"

"How can I when I know nothing about her? I haven't seen the girl in months, not that I'm saying I'd send her to prison, anyhow."

He got to his feet. "In that case, there's no more to be said, but I hope you'll be a little more careful after this. You've been noticed too much lately."

"But it doesn't worry me." She smiled. "I have your protection, judge, so nothing can harm me. Good day, sir."

He stopped in the doorway. "What's this witch, Margaret, like? Jared seems to be worried about her being in your care. He said she was young and very lovely, that she might come to harm roaming around without protection."

Hester cackled wildly. "Come to harm? So, to save her, he wants to send her to the fire. Your young Jared is odd, Mr. Reeves, but I can't tell you anything about the witch. No one has seen her since she disappeared from Salem, and it's my opinion no one ever will."

He stalked down the step, and Hester remained in the doorway, watching him with new, sharp grooves between her eyebrows.

It was past noon when Hester made her way carefully through the bramble growth to the hut where Margaret was hiding. She held a

basket carefully in front of her as she worked through the thickest of the bushes, for it was filled with jars of hot broth and stewed fruits. "If I find her with the stain washed off her face again, I'll have no more to do with her," she grumbled to herself, as she worked at disentangling her clothes from a clinging branch.

And then she became utterly still, her skirt still caught in the thorns, her shoulders straightening into flat lines. Someone was near the hut—a man was talking! She could hear the clear, deep tones of his voice. There was a pause and a laugh, followed by more words—gay words!

Hester put down the basket, pushed it under the cover of a bush and moved to the edge of the brambles, where she crouched to peer out at the tumble-down shack. The door was open and Margaret was standing on the broken step. The ugly stains were gone from her face and it was smoothly lovely, her dark hair gleamed in the sun. She was laughing—laughing gayly up into the eyes of a man—Jared Reeves!

Hester's lips clenched on each other and they became a straight, blue line in the parchment of her face. The girl was a fool! She must have let Reeves know her hiding-place—there was no other way he would have found it. No one in Salem would go near it, and now there she was, acting like a schoolgirl with a beau! She would stop laughing when Reeves had her charged as a witch.

He was leaving, putting out his hand to the girl, who accepted it shyly. Hester could not hear his low words, but she saw the confusion and excitement on Margaret's face and stifled an angry moan. Then he was gone, striding toward the bramble field, turning to wave before he disappeared.

When the weeds no longer shook under his passage, Hester marched toward the house, her cane not even touching the ground, her back straight and her gray eyes needle-sharp with anger. She opened the door without knocking and confronted the startled girl.

"I saw Jared Reeves leaving, which means that you'd better leave, too—and not come back. He may be here with half a dozen soldiers before an hour passes."

Margaret stepped back from the fierce, yellow face which was thrust out at her. "Oh, no, it's not like that," she said. "He knows the truth about me now—he realizes I'm no witch."

"Do you believe him?"

"Believe him—" Margaret hesitated, her face suddenly white, but then she met Hester's eyes squarely. "Yes, I do."

"Hm-m-m. I hope you're right, but if I were you I wouldn't take chances. How did he find you?"

"I . . . I was sitting in the sun at the edge of the woods, and he suddenly came out from behind the trees—was in front of me before I could move."

"So you brought him here to be sure he'd know where to find you."

The girl shook her head. "No. He sat down beside me and said: 'How can you be a witch—anyone as lovely as you?'

"When I made him understand what had happened, he said he would help me. He he's coming back tomorrow, Hester. He wants to be sure that I'm safe."

"Maybe he'll think you'd be safer in prison."

"Do you believe that of him? Do you think he's the kind of man who'd trick me? Why couldn't he have taken me back to Salem immediately if he wished?"

Hester grunted, her eyes narrowing. The girl was right to a certain extent. Jared Reeves might be an impulsive young man but he was not the type to resort to trickery. Not at all the same kind of man as his father; that was obvious in everything about him.

"He—was lovely to me. I had a few minutes of happiness for the first time in so long. It was nice to be with someone like him again."

"You sound as if you want him to come back—as if you're falling in love with him."

The girl's face turned scarlet and she darted a swift glance at the woman, but with the same challenging movement, she nodded. "I guess I am. Oh, Hester—help me, won't you?"

"Help you?"—sinking into a chair with a sigh of exasperation. "It seems to me that's what I've been doing."

"I know, I know, but not like that. I've been thinking—you're able to make yourself young and beautiful when you wish. Do that for me, too, will you?"

Hester laughed richly. "You're young enough, I think, and as pretty a girl as Jared Reeves has met."

"But I'm not really beautiful. I want to be so lovely that that he can't help caring for me. You can do it—you can give me the beauty of Helen or of—"

"Hush." Hester put her stick on the floor and leaned forward, balancing her elbows on her knees. "You don't know what you're talking about."

"I do! I saw you that night and you were handsome."

"It's one thing for Hester Gurney to change her appearance, but what do you think would happen to you? There's only one way to obtain unearthly beauty by sorcery and that's to make the Pact."

"The—Pact!" The color left Margaret's face and she shrank visibly. "The Pact—then women do it to be beautiful? Sell their souls? The great women you hear about who charmed the whole world with their loveliness—was that the answer?"

"Probably. But it won't do for you."

"No. No." Margaret shivered. "I'd rather even lose Jared's love than to become the property of the devil."

Hester arose and reached for her stick. "I left a basket of food in the bushes. I'll get it, and hope that young Reeves meant what he said."

"He did, I'm sure. But—you just told me I mustn't think of using sorcery because I'd have to sign the Pact. Then why did you—"

Hester's sharp gray glance touched the dark, young eyes, and she sat down again, her wide bluish lips flickering into a smile. "Why did I become a witch? I didn't become one—I was born one. I had no choice in the matter. You see—almost since the beginning of time there have been witches, sorcerers and demons. I am a descendant of the first human sorcerers."

"Descendant? But—"

"I'm trying to tell you"—sharply—"shortly after God created the earth and man, a certain set of angels in heaven were discontented. They felt they did not have enough power and that the tasks God set for them were too great. They began to go down to the earth to escape from the tiresomeness and injustice of heaven. Often they would gather on earth and discuss their problems or ways of overcoming them.

"And then, as they talked among themselves, two beautiful girls ap-

peared—they were the most beautiful things the angels had ever seen. All of them fell in love with the girls and finally quarreled among themselves in trying to press their attentions on the humans. Frightened, the girls ran away, but when the angels returned to heaven, they could not foregt the loveliness of earthly women. If these two had been so beautiful, then there would be others just as dazzling, so they grew more and more discontented in heaven and some of the bolder ones organized a revolt against God. They attempted to take over heaven and, of course, He rendered them powerless and drove them out of heaven forever, condemning them to wander about the earth.

"They immediately sought for beautiful women and, upon finding them, made them their wives. These fallen angles taught their wives sorcery and demonology. All children born of such unions were demons and the descendants of those children were either witches or demons. I am one of them and have always known it. The secret mark is upon my body, showing that I am a descendant of the fallen angels."

The girl shuddered. "So that's why—but some of the goodness of the angels has lived in you, too."

Hester shot to her feet, but Margaret caught her arm. "I wouldn't want to make the Pact to be beautiful, of course, but maybe you could fix a—love potion? Just a simple love potion and—"

"And you'll see that Jared Reeves takes it," Hester finished. "Yes, I'll do that. Next time I come I'll bring the love potion, and young Reeves will have no chance of escape."

THE SUN was pleasant as Hester sat on the step of her little house, cleaning the herbs she had gathered and thinking of the blood-written statements which she had hidden under the floor boards of her living room. She needed more of such statements. Needed at least one which would show Eldrid Colerage's part in the disposal of confiscated property. With Colerage involved, then—

She heard quick footsteps moving toward the edge of the clearing and, a second later, saw young Jared Reeves coming toward her at a near run. The herbs dropped from her hands and she picked up her broad hat, jammed it on her head. Something had happened to Margaret, or perhaps his conscience was bothering him, forcing him to act.

"Morning," she called thinly.

"Good morning, mother." Without waiting for an invitation, he sat down beside her.

"I haven't seen you in a long time," she murmured, grinning knowingly.

"No." He looked at her quickly, scowling. "Not since you drugged me and made my father believe I'd wanted to attend the Witches' Sabbath. You ancient fraud!"

She cackled, her mouth distorting as her smile grew wide. "Well, it was one way."

"Yes. I had to talk to you, today, because I'm worried about Margaret. Something's happened which may mean that she won't be safe."

"What? What's happened?" She leaned toward him swiftly. "Maybe you—"

"Another child has been bewitched. The son of the Caleb Winthrop's. He was stricken last night and nothing will bring him out of it. Nothing has any effect against the spirits which have been sent into him. He's even been bled, but it did no good. The whole town is aroused

and this morning a meeting was held at which it was resolved never to stop the hunt for witches until the last one has been found. The citizens and soldiers are going to comb the whole district, and if they should find the hut in the brambles—"

He stopped and distractedly ran his fingers through his hair.

"So it's there that Margaret is hiding."

"Stop pretending! You know, because you took her there. Now, what are we going to do to save her?"

Hester considered. "How do you feel about this latest witch hunt?"

He sat erect, still scowling, but his eyes turned cold. "I'm going to help with it. If we don't get rid of witches and witchcraft, the country will be destroyed. But Margaret—"

"What of Margaret?"

"She's no witch. Anyone would know that. Whatever happened to the Pickering child had nothing to do with her."

"Hm-m-m," Hester said and eyed the shadows of the woods. "I'm glad you're sure of that."

"I am and you've got help me. You're the only one who will, because everyone else is sure Margaret's a witch."

"Well, in that case, I'd leave her where she is for a while. If things get too bad, we may have to send her out of the country."

Jared's brown skin lost some of its color. "Out of the country? Then I'll go with her!"

He got to his feet and Hester also stood. "It's that way, is it? You're in love with her."

He nodded. "So much in love I couldn't live without her now."

"Well, stay away from her for a day or two. You never know who might get curious about your trips out here. I'll go into town and find out about the Winthrop boy. He may be cured by this time."

Jared shook his head. "They've tried everything—doctors, prayers and exorcism—but nothing works. He has convulsions and is out of his head."

"Don't stay here, anyhow. Get back to town."

SHE WATCHED him go and then returned to the cleaning of her herbs. She had better change Margaret's hiding place at once. There was a spot farther away, near a scattering of low hills which had little shelter but would be safer than Grannie's old hut. Boys like Jared Reeves could lose their heads and, driven by anxiety, lead the searchers right to the girl's door.

That afternoon, she carried food to the shack in the bramble field and told Margaret to be ready to leave shortly after dusk. The girl agreed listlessly. She seemed lifeless and tired, and, as Hester was leaving, asked: "You've not seen Jared Reeves? Or heard of him?"

She hesitated for a long minute, finally snapped, "No," and turned away.

As she approached her own house, her head lifted sharply and the pointed light in her eyes brightened. She stopped, her face tensing like that of a scenting animal, for there was something unusual in the accustomed picture. Her glance jabbed swiftly at the house, moved to the surrounding land and then back. And then she saw it—a shadow jutting out beyond the farther side of the house. A man's shadow.

"The fool, to think he can't be seen," she told herself and turned toward the rear of her home, moving swiftly around it to come noiselessly up behind him.

"Well, I'm here," she said, and even before he turned she recognized him.

It was Caleb Winthrop. He whirled with his face ashy.

"I might've known you'd come like this—out of the air," he said heavily. "God forgive me and help me."

"Were you waiting for me?"—leaning on her stick.

"Yes. My child's dying—possessed by demons and no one knows who put the curse on him. He's out of his head and raving mad. The doctor is helpless and we've prayed for hours trying to exorcise the evil ones, but it does no good; his condition doesn't change."

"I'm sorry for you," she said. "But why are you here, hiding behind my house?"

"I came to beg your help. Everybody knows that only a little while ago you saved Laban Pickering's little daughter, who was possessed. You can save my boy, too, if you will. I'll give you anything I own."

"Come and sit down." She spoke brusquely and led the way to the step. "You look pretty sick yourself. What's the use of coming to me? You know that the law forbids the use of sorcery or witchcraft to combat evil spirits. The only means of exorcism is prayer."

Winthrop dropped his tired face into his hands and spoke thickly against them. "We've tried prayer, tried everything. I can't stand it—my only child, my son! I'll compromise with the devil himself to save him."

"You mean"—Hester leaned toward him, speaking in a rattling whisper—"that you'll even make the Pact?"

His hands fell from his face like lead weights and he stared, open-mouthed. "Is that necessary? In the name of Heaven, do I have to do that? Did Pickering and even Judge Reeves—"

"No, no"—impatiently. "I just asked because you said you'd compromise with the devil. I tell no one to enter into the Pact because I have nothing to do with it. Only Zabulon himself can propose the Pact or accept it. So you want me to drive the demons out of your son?"

"I'll give you anything I've got. A bag of gold."

She nodded. "If you offer enough gold, I'll try, although I promise nothing. Sometimes the demons who take possession of a human being are very strong because they are working directly under the devil himself and are not merely commanded by a sorcerer. In case these are personal demons of Zabulon, I will be helpless."

"But you'll try? You promise?"

"Yes."

"Then come now. Don't waste a minute. How do I know that when I reach home the boy won't be gone?"

"You go first. I'll follow in a few minutes; it wouldn't do for us to be seen together."

He scrambled off, new hope in his eyes, and a few minutes later Hester, carrying her basket, started after him.

When she was led into the big, darkened room where ten-year-old Cal Winthrop lay, she stared down at the child for a long time, while the trembling father waited beside her. He, like Pickering, had ordered his wife to stay out of sight during Hester's visit, and the unhappy woman had reluctantly left her child to the witch's ministrations.

"Well?" he said huskily. "Do you think—"

The eerie blaze of blue light glowed stronger, came nearer—

She nodded very slowly. "Yes. I think these demons can be driven out."

The patient stirred, opened his eyes and glared about him. Looking up at the yellow-faced woman, he threw himself violently around the bed, screaming with piercing shrillness, beating with his hands as if he were struggling against the forces of hell itself.

"Hurry, woman, hurry!"

Hester glanced obliquely at the man, let the flickering smile stretch her blue lips, and calmly carried her basket to a table, where she took out various containers. One by one she opened them and explained to the father: "This is special incense, this myrrh and exorcised salt. Here are olives and wax. Now I make packages of them."

Deftly, she twisted paper around them and, holding the four packages, approached the bed. First she placed her hand on the boy's forehead and he immediately went into a struggling frenzy, beating the air and moaning. She placed a package under the mattress at each corner of the bed. Then she told Caleb Winthrop: "You'll have to leave me alone with him now, for no one is allowed to witness the next step."

"Alone—but—"

"If you don't wish to do as I say—"

"Certainly, I do. Certainly."

He ran for the door, and she called: "Don't stay near this room, either. It's not good to be too close when a witch is at work."

Hastily he closed the door and she heard his footsteps hurrying away. She approached the bed, caught the child by his shoulders and shook him. "Stop this, you little imp. You're not fooling me. Who told you to pretend to be possessed?"

He sat up in bed and stared at her. And then, as if coming to a decision, went into another mad fit of moaning and struggling.

Hester nodded grimly to herself, flipped him over and, holding him with one hand, applied the flat of the other hand with plenty of strength. His howls lifted to a shriek and she increased the warmth of her spanking. "When you're ready to behave yourself, I'll stop."

He caught his breath on a ragged sob, swallowed it and was quiet. Big-eyed, he rolled over to face her and she growled: "Are you ever going to try this again?"

"N-no."

"Who told you to do it?"

"No-body. Honest. Timothy Anders and I found a book about witches and how demons got possession of people, so we—decided to try it. I was to be first and after I let them cure me he was to get the evil spirits."

Hester took the paper packages from under the mattress, began to repack her basket. When she was ready to leave, she twisted her yellow face into a lined, birdlike mask and told the boy: "If you or Timothy make up a lie like this again, I'll really send the demons into you and then there won't be any cure. Now remember and don't tell, anyone what happened or you'll wish you hadn't."

He breathed a choked promise and Hester marched from the room, throwing an ominous glance over her shoulder.

"He's as well as ever now," she announced to Caleb Winthrop, who rushed excitedly past her into the bedroom.

He caught the child in his arms. "I could go down on my knees to you, witch or no witch. Here's the gold I promised."

He thrust it at her and she tucked it into a corner of the basket, but as she started from the room, he demanded: "You remember our bargain—there's no danger of the Pact, no chance the child may be marked? You didn't deceive me?"

She shook her head and turned away, but as she opened the outer door she heard a woman scream hysterically, caught her shrilling, broken words: "I don't believe her—I wouldn't believe any witch. We may have sold our souls to the devil! Or sold the boy's soul! If that's true, I want to die, Caleb. I'll never have another moment's peace. That witch left some claim, some mark, which will hold us to Satan—"

HESTER CLOSED the door and started down the narrow walk, but she was remembering that Caleb Winthrop was an employee of Eldrid Colerage, a senior clerk in his banking house. She scowled against the bright sunlight and, taking the gold from the corner of her basket, thrust it into her dress. And, before reaching home, she recalled, also, that this was the twelfth day and that at midnight the circle would gather. A group of men and one or two women who belong to the strata which accepted Simon Grobeler. The executioner, of course, would not come—or would he? Perhaps Thurlow Reeves had not yet given up hope of using him against her, or, more likely, Grobeler would be afraid to stay away.

She set about preparing for the meeting shortly after dusk, so that she could rest until midnight. But she had only arranged the center table and laid the fire when a demanding knock smashed against the door. She caught the black candle hastily off the table, thrust it out of sight and went to answer. Jared Reeves entered so rapidly that he gave the impression of bursting into the room. He caught Hester's shoulders, his gripping fingers digging into her flesh.

"Did you use witchcraft on Caleb Winthrop's child—tell me, did you?"

She stared narrowly into the eyes so close to her own. "Take your hands off me, young man. Few people pull Hester Gurney around."

But his fingers pressed harder and for a moment she thought he was going to shake her. "Answer me! I believed what my father said about you—that you were just a harmless old woman who pretended to be a witch to make herself more interesting. But I heard Eldrid Colerage talking to my father a little while ago—"

"So," she broke in. "What did he say? And let go of me; you're doing no good mauling me like this."

His hands dropped. "I was leaving the house a couple of hours ago and heard Colerage's voice coming from my father's study. I was surprised because I've never known Colerage to call on us before, so I stopped. He was saying that Winthrop had come to him begging for help—confessing that he had gotten you to drive the demons out of his son when everything else failed. Now he's nearly insane with fear that he's made the Pact and bound himself over to the devil. He wants Colerage to have you arrested and executed as a witch so that he and his family will be safe."

"I see. Sit down, son." She took her favorite chair and her face seemed less yellow, as if pallor were dimming the surface of the skin. "Are they about to arrest me—is that why you're concerned? I'm flattered."

He scowled and waved his hand irritably. "I'm thinking of Mar-

garet. Why did you take her under your protection? What have you been trying to do to her? Do you want to make a witch of her, too? Why did my father pretend that he was sure you knew nothing of real sorcery? Why? Is that crazy story about your saving my little sister's life true? That would mean—"

"Be still!" Hester snapped. "You're in this now, because of your association with Margaret. Pull yourself together and tell me what else was said between Colerage and Judge Reeves. Are they going to order my arrest?"

"No," Jared said, after a moment. "Not yet. My father persuaded him that the one case of Winthrop's child wasn't enough for conviction and that they had better wait. Colerage intends to have you watched, and as soon as you're caught in the practice of witchcraft, you go to the scaffold."

"I see. Judge Reeves wasn't ready, was he?"

"What do you mean? Maybe you're telling me that my father's afraid of you—and I'm beginning to think he is. But I've got to find Margaret and get her out of the country—get her away from you. I'm going to do it this night, and don't try to stop me. I'll save her from the law and from you."

"Well, where will you look for her?"

"At the hut in the bramble field, of course. She promised not to leave without letting me know." He strode for the door. "I'm warning you, witch or not, stay out of this and let me look after Margaret."

He jerked open the door and leaped down the single step—only to stop as if he had been suddenly frozen. Waiting before the door were four soldiers. They closed in around him and the officer in charge said: "Jared Reeves, we are placing you under arrest as a friend and consort of witches and a suspected sorcerer."

"You're what! As a— Hold on, here, you can't arrest me without proof! My father'll have you all dismissed for this. As a sorcerer! That's insanity. Why—"

"You have been seen visiting this house on various occasions—and Hester Gurney is now suspected of being a witch.

"But you're not arresting her!"

"We're following orders."

"Did Eldrid Colerage arrange this? If he did—"

Two of the soldiers caught his arms and the officer said: "You'd better come without trouble, Reeves. You'll have a trial and a chance to acquit yourself."

Jared started to struggle violently, only to subside into quietness. "Go ahead," he murmured.

Hester left the open door and walked down the step after them, her blue lips moving in silent words. If young Jared Reeves was being arrested for associating with her, that meant her own time was short. But it was puzzling that she had not been placed under arrest right now. Perhaps Thurlow Reeves had managed, in some way, to prevent Colerage's ordering her arrest and this had been his answer—to imprison Reeves' son!

"But it won't be long," she told herself. "Unless I can work faster than they—and there'll be no twelfth-night meeting tonight."

Her sharp glance, leaving the disappearing soldiers and their prisoner, swept over the scene around her and came to rest on the shadows of the woods. A man was standing there, rigidly still against the trees. He had probebly been sent to watch her, and there would be others now, spy-

ing on every movement, on every moment, working to send her to the fire.

An hour before midnight, Hester's little house, set on the bit of marshy land close to the woods, was totally dark. And inside, Hester sat at the window, watching the woods and surrounding land. Several times she saw the shadow of a man slipping through the trees or across the open ground, but finally he settled down at the edge of the woods as if making ready for the night. She groped for the basket, an unlighted lantern at her feet and, carrying her stick, moved across the room to the kitchen. At the rear door, she waited a long time, but finally slipped through to the outer darkness, pausing once more while she strained to hear every tiny sound. But at last she started, going across the boggy stretch of ground behind her cottage and cutting into the fields.

She traveled north for more than half an hour, moving through rough, darkness-hidden fields until, spent and out of breath, she stopped to rest and listen for sounds of pursuit. But finally she turned south to circle back toward the woods.

Emerging at last from the brambles surrounding the hut where Margaret Cartevor was hiding, she heard low, muffled sobs. And she went, with grim haste, to the door, knocked violently and entered as the girl cried: "Who's there?"

"Only I," she said gruffly. "I've come to take you away."

"Where— Wait'll I make a light!"

"Do nothing of the kind. Follow me out."

"What has happened?" Margaret demanded, believing the gloom concealed the fact that she was dabbing a handkerchief against her wet eyes.

"A new witch hunt, and you'll be safer farther away. What are you sniveling about?"

"Nothing. It's lonesome here."

"You're upset about young Reeves."

"He hasn't been to see me. Every minute I expect him to appear, but the hours go by and he doesn't come."

"Probably he can't, with this new witch scare going on. If he came to see you he might be followed and that would mean you'd go to prison."

The girl caught her hand, clinging to it. "Do you think that's it? You don't believe it's because he's changed—isn't interested in me any more?"

"Of course not. Let's start now. We've a long journey ahead."

She led the way north and they traveled for hours without pause. More than once the girl, stumbling to her knees on the rough ground, begged for a rest. But Hester would not alow a halt until dawn was edging the horizon and then she pointed to the outline of low hills. "There we are. It isn't much farther, so we might as well get it over with."

Margaret was staggering when they walked up a ravine to a cave-like opening in the hillside. "This isn't as comfortable as the hut but it will have to do. I'll find a way to get food to you—brought enough to last two days if you're careful—and there's a stream below which will give you water. Don't wander around too much and keep the root stain on your face, for the search may spread far before it's finished."

The girl sank down on the hard ground and began to cry softly. "I'm a hunted criminal and I've never done harm to anyone. This is living the same as a wild beast, cowering in a cave, out of the light."

Hester patted her shoulder, awk-

wardly. "It'd be worse to be dead, and things may change soon. Now, pull yourself together and I'll be back as soon as I can arrange it."

She stepped into the open, her shoulders sagging and her feet heavy, to begin the journey back to Salem. Hours later, she was reeling with exhaustion and found a sheltered place to sleep, not awakening until dusk, when she set off again, grateful for the cover of darkness.

THE NIGHT was half gone when she sighted her house and crept warily toward it, wondering what had happened in her absence. The man stationed in the woods might have wondered at her failure to reappear and entered the house. The disappointed members of the twelfth-night circle—what had they done when they found her missing?

Carefully, she opened the back door, felt her way inside, walking noiselessly. But finally, reassured, she made a light for a whale-oil lamp and looked around her living room. Nothing seemed changed and she sank into a chair with a low, moaning sigh of weariness. Too exhausted to arise and undress, she dropped into a heavy slumber, her head drooping over the chair arm.

But she sensed disaster before she awakened. Knew, as her eyes opened, that someone was in her home. Light struck at her and she started up, confronting Simon Grobeler, whose rough hands were touching her. Reaching for her stick, she swung it out before her. "Keep your distance, or you'll end as your death charm did!"

"Hear me, first!" he shouted. His face was pale and his little eyes excited—but the excitement was not all fear. It was mixed with exultation. "They held a hearing for young Reeves within an hour after he was arrested yesterday."

"Oh—and what happened? What did they charge him with?"

The executioner spread his legs to brace his gross body.

"He was handled carefully. Eldrid Colerage didn't want to be too hard on Thurlow Reeves' son, so they didn't even give me a chance to talk him into a confession. He was held in prison for only a little while before he was taken to the committee and—mind this now—they charged him with consorting with witches without even naming the witches! That should do your heart good, Hester, that they knew, but were afraid to name you."

"Who was afraid?" she demanded, her stick still raised to hold him away. "And, Simon, it'll be safer for you if you don't come into my house, unasked, again. I might not like it and you'd find yourself unable to speak or move."

He backed awkwardly, like a great, unwieldy animal trying to sidle away. "Forgive me for that—I'm sorry. It was just I was so excited when you didn't answer my knock that I tried the door and found it open. So I came in."

"Found it open? I don't believe you."

"It's the truth, Hester. It was unlocked, I swear it."

"All right, all right"—irritably. "Tell me what they did to young Reeves. They couldn't convict him on such flimsy grounds, without proof."

"Maybe that's why they used the flimsy grounds. They didn't want to convict him, but just to frighten him and the rest of the town. People know now that anyone who associates with witches will not be safe."

"Get on with it. What happened?"

"While he was being examined by the committee they sent two men to his house to hunt for *indici* of sorcery such as bits of coal or needles hidden in his bed. It's known that every real student of sorcery has these things concealed about his bed because they come out of his ears and mouth as he sleeps.

"They found nothing and the committee held that the charges against him were not sufficiently proven. They also took into consideration his family's position and his good conduct up to this time, so they let him off with mild punishment."

"Punishment? For what?"

Simon shrugged and grinned. "Wanted to warn people, I guess. He was sentenced to stand for two hours this morning in the market place while his offense was cried off at intervals by a jailer. After that he is free."

"The fools! To do that to the boy. He'll never forget it—or let them forget it."

Grobeler's loose mouth spread into a grin. "Judge Reeves won't, either. This looks like those two have come to a split or something of the kind, as if Colerage was warning the judge he could smash him completely."

"Well"—Hester moved her stick meaningly—"get out, now. I'm busy. When does young Reeves begin his sentence?"

"At ten o'clock—not more than an hour from now. All right, you don't have to do that again; I'm going." At the door he swung back. "What happened last night? You weren't here."

"What happened doesn't concern you. I just didn't wish to be here. Maybe I won't feel like it in the future, either."

"Does that mean—"

"It means nothing. Get out."

As soon as he was gone, Hester prepared a hasty breakfast and, having finished it, started for Salem. She had not bothered to even straighten her clothing, and she looked more than ever like some eerie thing fluttering out of a forest at night.

THE WHOLE populace of the town was flowing toward the market place and the street rang with the excited shouts of children. But the men and women looked white-faced and frightened. When they caught sight of Hester Gurney they almost broke into a run to get away from her, to keep a safe distance between themselves and her dangerous presence.

The market place was jammed and Hester crowded up against a building to look at the spectacle. The open space was triangular, and at one point a low, crude wooden scaffold had been erected. On it was a contrivance with places for arms and head to be thrust through. As she watched, two soldiers began to mount the steps; behind them walked Jared Reeves and after him stalked two more soldiers. Reeves moved with his head up, his mouth set, his whole bearing one of suppressed fury.

When they were in the middle of the small platform, one of the soldiers made a signal to the crowd, and as it quieted, began to read from a paper:

> "Jared Reeves—for endangering his soul by consorting with witches and being interested in sorcery—two hours in stocks in the market place."

As he finished reading, another soldier stepped forward, lifted the upper half of the stocks, thrust

Jared's head and arms through and then snapped the ugly contraption into place, locking it so that the boy could not move or change the position of his head or hands.

A sound like a groaning laugh went up from the crowd. Reeves' eyes were on fire as they glared at the faces below, and some of the onlookers moved away, as if ashamed. Hester left her place near the wall and worked through the crowd, doing so with little difficulty, for everyone scattered at her approach. Beneath the scaffold she put both hands on her stick and peered up at Jared with her blue lips stretching. "It won't be long before it's over," she said.

He scowled. "Maybe not, but something worse than this is going to happen to a few other people when I get out of here. The igorant, stupid fools."

"Yes, it's strange how many people like yourself—just as innocent—have gotten worse punishment. I've no doubt that many women sent to the fire knew no more of witchcraft than you do."

His eyes lost their wild anger and regarded her thoughtfully. "You're probably right. If they can do it to me—" He broke off and lowered his tone. "What of—her?"

"Don't worry. Everything is all right." She turned back through the crowd to make a leisurely return trip to her cottage. She had no need to hurry now, for Jared Reeves would come to her, and when he did—

She finished the thought with a low laugh.

It was sunset when Jared Reeves arrived. Hester was waiting for him, her favorite chair turned so that she could see through the open door. "This is a surprise," she greeted him.

"Did you dare come back here—right after your punishment?"

He flung into the room, smothering a short word under his breath. "Dare? What am I—a criminal or a slave? I'll dare do as I please. Knowing a witch doesn't make me one. Besides, I had to come here. Where's Margaret? She may not be safe in that place, but I was afraid to go there—I may have been followed."

"You don't mind getting me in trouble, but you worry about her."

He paused and looked down at her. "You're capable of looking after yourself, and from the talk I heard between Colerage and my father it's you who should stand trial."

She uttered a single note of high, thin laughter. "Then why aren't you afraid to be here with me—alone?"

"Let's drop this. I want to know about Margaret."

"She's not at the hut. I took her farther away because I, too, was worried about her. Sit down, Jared."

He hesitated and then sank into a chair. "Listen to me; I'm not trying to harm your Margaret. I saved her life by hiding her and I'm not attempting to get her to make the Pact. She'll tell you that. Now you want to be sure she's safe and I can tell you how to do it. There are a few things you won't know for a day or two, but this time, witch or no, you'll have to trust me. I want you to bring Eldrid Colerage here to my house—tonight."

Jared started out of his chair and then dropped back into it. "Colerage—why, he'd arrest you as a witch—have you executed if you tried anything on him!"

"Exactly. That's how you'll get him here. Go to him and tell him

that your trial and punishment shocked you back to sanity. You were horrified to realize you'd been associating with witches. Say you've arranged to have me demonstrate my magic for him so he will have all the proof he needs to place me in prison. Wait, wait"—as Jared started to speak. "Then I want you to go to the place where I left Margaret and bring her here. You will not get back until late at night, which is just what I want."

"Bring her here? For Colerage to imprison along with you? Are you entirely crazy?"

"No. I know what I'm doing. Eldrid Colerage is the most dangerous man in this community, Jared, and once we trap him, no more innocent, hysterical women will be burnt as witches. Leave now and do as I tell you—say that you know the witch Margaret often comes here and that he may also find her, which will be a double triumph for him. Think of how he'll like the idea of dividing her little piece of land and my few coins!"

"What do you mean by that—dividing her property and yours? Are you telling me—"

"You'll know everything about it after you've brought him here."

Jared stared into her piercingly bright eyes and got to his feet. "I'm going to do it. I shouldn't trust you, but I do. There's only one condition—I'll be here, too, with Margaret, and if there's any threat to her, I'll take care of both Colerage and you."

Hester's smile played again. "You don't sound as gentle as you look, son, but get started or the day will be gone."

He left and Hester closed and locked the door behind him. She had many things to prepare for Eldrid Colerage's visit. Fresh herbs and special ointments as well as various other mysterious adjuncts of her craft. Before starting to work, she pulled up a sawed section of floor board and took out the red-written papers which she had placed there. Glancing carefully over them, she thrust them back, pushed down the boards and covered the space with a rug.

Jared was back in less than an hour. "He's agreed to come, but not with me. He wants no witness who can ever involve him in anything—but I think you're taking a chance. He may post soldiers around here so that they'll come on the run when he wants them."

"He'll probably have a squad of them waiting, but I'll manage. It's good that he doesn't wish you with him, because you're to start for Margaret right now and get her back here as quickly as possible, which won't be until after midnight, no matter how fast you travel. She's in the hills, and if you'll go north—" She told him in detail how to reach the girl's hiding place.

"I'll go back into town, first," Jared said. "In case one of Colerage's men trailed me here."

"What time will Colerage come?"

"I told him a few minutes before midnight."

"Good." Hester nodded vigorously and fumbled in the folds of her cape, bringing out a star made from the feathers of various birds. "This will get you there and back safely. Put it in your clothing."

His glance swept with sudden anger against her face. "No, thanks, mother. I'll get back without it and bring Margaret, too."

"Wait," she said suddenly. "When you come back, Eldrid Colerage will

be here, so I want you to enter by the back door. I'll leave it open. Come out to the kitchen and I'll show you how to get to the bedroom."

In the kitchen, she pulled aside a curtain which covered a number of old garments hanging on the wall and revealed a smaller-than-ordinary door which led into the bedroom. "When you come in, be quiet and listen carefully."

He nodded, said a quick good-by and was gone. The rest of the day was long in passing for Hester. At dusk she ate a simple meal and then sat at the window, studying the barren ground before her house, running her quick glance over the woods. As twilight depened into dark, she saw the brush at the end of the dry land move and realized that a man had dropped down behind its cover. Later, another figure flitted toward the trees, and after a half-hour interval two more men moved hastily through the gloom.

Her smile flickered and she left the window to arrange the center table and candle. After that she rested, dozing occasionally, until the hands of the clock pointed to quarter to twelve. Even as she started up, there was a knock at the door. A measured, even knock.

HESTER swung the door open very suddenly, but the man on whom the flare of the candle fell showed no trace of surprise.

"Good evening, Hester Gurney. I am Eldrid Colerage."

"I know that, sir."

He smiled palely. "Won't you ask me in?"

"Why, certainly." She stepped back and he moved into the room. There was a preciseness about his spare body, even about his dark, old-fashioned clothes. His thin, sharp face was not merely pale; it was bloodless and without color except for his long, slightly reddened nose to which he constantly applied a handkerchief so that the movement showed the transparent thinness of his wrists. Only his eyes told what had made him a power. They were deep-set, clear, hard blue. Eyes that missed nothing and understood everything.

Hester remained standing, her smile wide. "This is an unexpected honor, sir. Eldrid Colerage doesn't visit many people."

He sat down, lifting his coat carefully. "I'm going to be direct and honest with you." He dabbed at his nose again and once more glanced around the room. "Young Reeves came to me today and said he was sure there was much I didn't understand about sorcery. You probably know that I've been working to stamp out witchcraft. He insists witches fall into more than one category, that some of them use their magic for good, for healing and driving out demons, while the other kind only work evil. It is his idea that the witches who practice good works should not be judged as are the others."

"What has that to do with me, sir?"

Colerage spread his hands and then immediately lifted one of them to press the handkerchief against his reddened nose. "Young Reeves said you are capable of sorcery but have never been known to do harm. When I wouldn't believe him he said you would allow me to come here so that I could see for myself—in fact, he even set the time."

"Oh, he did, did he?" Hester clamped her lips together and straightened angrily, only to bend

toward him, suddenly, whispering: "This is probably madness on my part, sir, because everyone knows how set you are against witchcraft, but I'd like to show you that all witches are not evil!"

"You're willing to demonstrate to me?"

"Yes. Yes. If you are here on Jared's word, I can trust you. Now, sit in that chair, close to the fireplace."

"Just how will this prove your sorcery might be good and not evil?"

"You'll see. Take that chair and be quiet."

She backed to the table bearing the candle, made the cold blue light flare up and, as the man half rose to his feet, rushed toward him dramatically. "No, you must not. In the name of Heaven, don't interrupt or I can't tell what will happen—"

Her claws of hands closed on his arms to push him down into the chair, but he jerked away from her and rubbed his left arm. "What did you stick into me, woman? What was that? It felt like a knife blade!"

"Knife? Why, how could that be? Look at the sleeve of your coat—there's no mark on it. You only imagined you felt a prick, or perhaps my old hands are so rough they hurt even through the cloth."

His sharp, cold blue eyes stared at her, but he nodded.

"Before I begin the exhortation to the spirits, I will serve the liquid which all students of demonology must drink."

She shuffled to the table to prepare the cup, but Colerage laughed softly. "You needn't expect me to drink something that'll probably drug me."

His words slowed and turned thick at the end of his sentence, and once more he got to his feet, only to reel down again. His eyes were no longer coolly knowing—they were terrified.

"What have you done?"

Hester, her lips stretching into the blue mark of mirth, rubbed herb leaves into a cup and poured hot water on them. Then, holding the cup as though it were a precious thing, she carried it to him.

"Drink."

He shook his head and turned his face aside, trying to rise, struggling for words. The cords in his throat swelled with the terrible effort and his blue eyes seemed raised from the normal depths of their sockets—raised and staring. Hester pushed the cup against his loose mouth. "Drink!" she snapped.

He tried to close his lips, but she pushed the rim of the cup between them, tilted his head back and poured the contents into his mouth. Dazedly he swallowed and little effort was required to get the rest of the mixture down his throat.

HESTER stood back then and calmly watched him slump into unconsciousness. But instead of allowing him to sleep she pulled him from the chair onto the floor and, bringing a basin of water from the kitchen, wrung out cold cloths which she applied to his head until he stirred and moaned. He finally sat up, his glazed eyes rolling and his spare frame shivering.

Kneeling beside him, Hester intoned: "Do you see him? The Black Goat? Zabulon himself. See, he receives in his jeweled courtroom and all must do honor to him. Down on your knees."

"I see, I see," Colerage muttered and strove so hard to get onto his knees that he toppled over onto his face and lay still.

Hester got up, went to the table which held the candle and from its drawer took a bowl of red dye. In another drawer she found a hare's foot, and dabbling the hare's foot in the dye, she bent over Colerage, tore open his clothing and pressed the hare's foot on his bare skin. Putting down the bowl, she watched the red mark for a long moment with a smile of terrible fierceness upon her face, for the mark would never disappear. Mixed with the red dye was an acid which set the color forever, and as long as Eldrid Colerage lived, the devil's mark would be upon him.

Pulling his clothing back into place, she wiped his face with more cool cloths, slapped water on the back of his neck until he once more sat up, arousing a little from the effects of the cannabis sativa. "Listen." Hester leaned close and made her voice a hiss. "You are in the court of the Great Black Goat. You must do what he tells you. Hear him speak?"

"Yesh yesh, the Great Black Goat!"

But then Hester jerked erect, her whole body still with listening. From outside the house had come the distinct sound of a footstep! Another one, now— If the soldiers had circled the house, they might come in and, finding Colerage close to unconsciousness, arrest her.

She got to her feet, went noiselessly to the kitchen and saw the outer door open. But it was Jared Reeyes, and with him was Margaret Cartevor. They both looked spent with exhaustion, but she motioned them toward the bedroom and returned to Eldrid Colerage, who was crying: "See him dance! The Black Goat! I'll dance with him."

Hester shook him. "Listen to me carefully now. You're hunting the witch, Margaret Cartevor, aren't you? Do you wish to find her?"

"Witch . . Margaret—"

She shook him more violently and some of the glaze left his eyes. "Show me the witch," he said thickly. "I came here to capture two witches—Hester Gurney and Margaret Cartevor. Show me the witch."

"Margaret Cartevor will appear before you—out of nothing. Look —follow the direction in which I am pointing!"

She lifted an arm toward the black-curtained opening into the bedroom which, in the gloom, was merely a deeper shadow. "Margaret Cartevor," she said clearly, "appear before us."

And from the gloom stepped Margaret. She stood silently, looking down at Eldrid Colerage, and the man shuddered, lifted his hands to cover his face. But when he removed them the girl was still before him. She began to speak in tones not unlike those of Hester. "You, too, have gone to the Witches' Sabbath. You, too, are now one of the devil's own."

"No—" The thick sound was a cry, but as it tore from his throat, it turned into a bubbling moan. He tried to spring to his feet, but could not pull himself from his knees, and with a convulsive sob he fell to the floor, unconscious.

Hester moved across the room and sat down in a chair. "Tell Jared he can come out now."

When young Reeves appeared, she murmured: "Well, there he is, but he has at least half a dozen soldiers waiting—I don't know how the two of you ever got in unnoticed."

"I expected there'd be plenty of men watching, so we practically

crawled to the house. But what are you going to do with him?"

She lifted her hunched shoulders and moved her hands. "We have to get him out of here, but he's helpless, and if we tried to carry him, there'd be a few swords run through our throats."

Jared frowned. "Hadn't you better wait until he comes to? In that way you can do more with him, get a statement, maybe."

She cackled. "I've something better than any written statement now. Something he can never deny or conceal."

"You were going to explain—" Jared began. "Maybe I ought to know—"

"You'll know plenty once he's out of here. I don't want to wait too long, either. The soldiers may get suspicious and rush the house. No telling what'll happen then. Jared, could you take him on your shoulders and get out the back way again?"

"I don't know—Margaret and I walked on our knees to get here. Still, I can go on my knees again and drag him after me! I'll try it—but where will I take him?"

"To his home—leave him on his own doorstep, which will give him and his family something to think about when he comes to. Once away from here, you aren't liable to encounter anyone. The streets of Salem are deserted at this hour."

"All right." He knelt beside Colerage and, with Hester's aid, got the unconscious man onto his shoulders, stalked with him to the back door, where he finally slipped out, crouching, into the darkness.

Margaret and Hester returned to the living room, but the girl could not remain quiet. She paced the floor nervously, murmuring: "If he's seen—or recognized—he'll be in trouble. Coming on top of what happened yesterday—"

"Be still." Hester snapped, and then her yellow skin grew light and her eyes turned sharp. Something had scraped against the front doorstep; someone was standing close to the door. A knock shook the wood and a man roared:

"Open or we'll break it down."

"Get into the bedroom," Hester told the girl, "and keep still, no matter what happens."

Pulling open the door, she stepped back to the center table and eyed the soldiers striding toward her. "Where is Mr. Colerage?"

"If you're speaking of Eldrid Colerage, how would I know where he is? Certainly he wouldn't come here."

"But he did. We saw him enter."

"Well, he's not here now. You may search the place if you like."

They eyed her and edged into the kitchen, turned back through the living room to the door of the bedroom. "You see that there's no one here," she shrilled, "so get out and leave an old woman to her sleep."

"We've got to find Mr. Colerage, even if it means tearing the house apart. He came in here and he hasn't left. So—"

"So you'll leave now!" Her voice lifted to piercing heights, and the sight of her hands, groping on the table, seemed to freeze the soldiers, making them like things of wood. For Hester's hands were no longer yellow claws—they were strange, huge outlines which gleamed silver. And from them, light was rising—spraying lines of light which turned into showers of sparks. The soldiers, watching the light break over them, cowered.

"You'll leave now!" Hester shrilled

again, her queerly changed hands fluttering more swiftly.

The man nearest the door turned and leaped for the opening, plunging through it into the darkness. That aroused the others and they fled after him, the pound of their racing footsteps sinking away into the night as they charged from the accursed land on which the witch's house stood.

The movement of Hester's hands stopped, the light disappeared and she covered an earthen jar, a little, low sound of amusement coming from deep in her throat. But as she glanced up she saw that Margaret had shrunk against the wall and was regarding her with horror. "You're one of the devil's worst sorcerers. You—"

"I saved you from trouble," Hester said calmly. "Now, we'll go to bed, because we must be up at dawn, for tomorrow will see the end of Eldrid Colerage and his witch burning."

It was full daylight the next morning when Hester faced Margaret and Jared on the step of her cottage and gave them final instructions.

"Go directly to the market place, no matter what happens. Show Margaret to them and explain. You have the three papers I gave you?"

"Let me go alone," young Reeves pleaded again. "I can't take a chance with her. It may mean her death."

"You have to take her with you —that'll bring the whole town; it'll finish this business once and for all. Afterward, she'll be a free woman. She can't go on living in hiding, being hunted like an animal, for the rest of her days."

"She's right," Margaret said, her young head lifting. "It's better this way—either I'll be free or—"

"Hush!" He put his fingers on her lips. "Don't say it."

"Better start now."

He nodded, drew the girl's arm through his and moved down the step to the ground. Hester watched them out of sight, then rushed into the house to don her cape and hat, catch up her stick. Before they were halfway to Salem she was hurrying after them, but as she neared the market square, the crowd swirled into her path and cut her off. The sight of the missing witch had brought everyone hurrying to witness her end. Hastily dressed men and women pushed and fought to get into the market place, voices shouted: "She's come back—the devil's brought her back. Young Reeves has her here."

This morning no one made way for Hester; they were too excited to remember the danger of contact with her person, indifferent to everything but glimpsing the face of Margaret Cartevor. After a useless few minutes of trying to slip past the jam, Hester used her stick, pronging, pushing and thrusting with it, fighting a way through. Then she was caught in another swirl of human beings as a great roar went up: "Take her to the scaffold—Duck Acre—Duck Acre! She needs no trial. Give her the fire!"

Jared Reeves was shouting wildly, hoarsely: "Listen first—you fools —you madmen! Listen!"

Hester jabbed with her stick and a man twisted from her path. She plunged on, violently, perspiration rolling down her face, her breath laboring. Finally, she was through and could see Jared and Margaret. They boy stood at one point of the triangular market place with his arm around the girl, trying to command

the crowd to silence. But it rushed forward, a great snarl lifting from a hundred throats. Hands reached for Margaret, a woman's fingers clutched her skirt and tore half of it away. A man threw a stone which caught Jared on the shoulder. White, his lips a colorless line in his face, he put the girl behind him and struck out at the nearest of their attackers. Another roar and shrieking women fought to get at the girl with their tearing hands.

"Back, Jared—get back!" Hester screamed. Panting, she reached him, stood before him, fumbling in the folds of her old cape. Her stick fell and she swept both hands toward the sky. A vapor spread up before her—a yellowish cloud—and then a choking stench dashed into the faces of the mob. Sulphur—the smell of hell itself. The witch had brought the devil to protect her with flaming brimstone!

The sheet of mist deepened and the nauseating smell sent the crowd back, gasping and coughing. "Talk now!" Hester cried to young Reeves. "Tell them!"

He jumped in front of the sheet of sulphurous mist. "Look," he cried, waving two sheets of paper over his head. "Here are the statements of Uriah Hale and Nathan Banks, confessing that they attended the Witches' Sabbath. These papers are written in their blood. They say that the confiscated property of witches has not been turned over to the community funds, but has been divided among Laban Pickering, Nathan Banks, Uriah Hale, Simon Grobeler and—Eldrid Colerage! Wait—listen! Eldrid Colerage arranged this. Eldrid Colerage is a servant of the devil, a soldier of the Black Goat. You will find on his breast the red mark of a hare's foot —which you all know—"

A sullen, growling gasp broke over his words as the startled mob began to understand what he was saying. Hester watched Jared's white, taut face and decided that she would not shrill out the name of his father, as she had intended. That was too much for the boy—to name his own father as a member of the dishonest killing band. But if the others were put to the trial, they would name him and there would be no hope of his escaping.

"I'm not finished," Jared called. "This girl"—putting his arm around Margaret—"is no witch! Many innocent women have been sent to the fire by Colerage and his companions. Go to Colerage and demand the proof—you will find the hare's mark on his chest. Read these—he

held out the papers. "There is the truth of what these servants of hell have been doing."

He stopped, still taut, his eyes watching the nearest faces—waiting breathlessly for what might happen. His arm was tightly about Margaret; tightly and protectively. A man edged forward.

"Let me read those papers."

Jared handed them over. Others crowded about to read, and a man stood on tiptoe to shout to the crowd: "Let's drag them out—their guilt's written here—drag them out and build a special scaffold for them. Take them to Duck Acre. We'll find Colerage at his home—the rest at the council hall. If Colerage has the mark of the hare's foot on his chest, no trial is needed for any of them. Come—follow me."

He started from the market place toward the home of Eldrid Colerage, and after a second's pause the others streamed after him, shouting.

Hester, Jared and Margaret stood alone in the square listening to the receding roar of the crowd. And Hester broke the silence with a shrill cackle. "They'll find Colerage all right and discover the mark. Today there will be the biggest execution this country's ever known, and I must go home so I'll be ready to attend. I always go to watch the executions, and I wouldn't miss this one."

Margaret shuddered and drew closer to young Reeves. "They'll burn them—no doubt of that. But what will happen afterward?"

"People will be sick of witch burning, and that's when you can go to work, Jared. You can fight for laws doing away with the execution of witches and the confiscation of their property. If they must be punished, there are prisons."

He nodded solemnly. "And I'll do it, too. But first—"

None of them had noticed the approach of a half-grown boy, but suddenly he was clinging to Jared Reeves' arm. "Our mother's upset," he sobbed. "Father's left—gone away. He left last night and he's not coming back; he took two serving men with him and is striking south, Jared. He . he—"

The tautness left young Reeves' face and he put his arm around the youngster's shoulder, murmuring: "He's left—he got out in time. Thank God! Go home," he told his brother. "I'll come a little later."

As the boy ran off, Hester said: "Well, I'm leaving now. I've much to do before the execution this afternoon. Think of it—a fire for at least five. Duck Acre will be all smoke."

Reeves checked the words that started to his lips, and Hester smiled, her smile flickering widely. "What plans have you two made?"

"We're going to marry right away. After that, I'll see there are no more witch burnings in Salem if I have to give my whole life to stopping them."

"Good. And don't lose any time about marrying, for there's never any time to be lost. Margaret"—she caught the girl's hand and drew her away from Jared—"take this and keep it on you, always. It will make your marriage happy until the day of your death."

She fumbled in the folds of her cape and brought out a gleaming reddish stone, peculiarly marked at the edges with a double triangle drawn in its center. Putting it into the girl's hand, she closed her fingers over it. "Never be without it."

"I won't," Margaret promised.

Hester nodded and regarded them with her wide, leering smile before she turned to shuffle away.

THE END.

Look About You!

A purple dog casts orange shade,
  A black moon hangs in a silver sky,
My arms bake white in the brown sunlight
  And I feel sounds with my eye.

Fish with feathers swarm the sea
  And convex caves build the liquid land;
Three great whales and a horse with scales
  Dance on the scarlet sand

We each live in a wonderland;
  A blue to you is a red to me,
A shade is seen, and we call it green—
  I wonder what you see?

I know my world. It bores me so!
  And I must bear it until I die,
While your every day is a land of fey—
  And you're as bored as I!

THEODORE STURGEON.

SWAMP TRAIN

by HARRY WALTON

A very special trip, the old train made, for one passenger only—

THE car sank fast into the slime of Marrow Marsh, so fast and so deeply that neither moonlight nor the slim, powerful beam of the flashlight revealed so much as a shadow of it beneath the murky water. The beam trembled a little, but the weight of the satchel in Rister's left

hand steadied him. Fifty grand! *The* fifty grand he and Maxie Blom had heisted from the big-time boys in Chicago. Gamblers' money—his now.

Easy money. A cinch to get Maxie out of the way. City bred, he'd been nervous, jumpy, out here in the sullen wilderness of the marsh lands. Cleverly, Rister had played on that nervousness. A sudden order to stop, while he pretended to listen for a following car—a clip over the ear with his automatic, and Maxie was out. No danger in these God-forsaken swamps of anybody butting in. Rister knew this country. He knew Marrow Marsh. He had had only to prop Maxie in the driver's seat and head the car toward the bank. A splash and it was over. Likely enough Maxie would never be found. If he were, there'd be no marks but a skull abrasion he might have got when the car went over. Smart and fool proof, the whole scheme. Rister liked things that way.

Fifty grand!

There were angles, like being stuck out here in the swampland without a car. But the car had been Maxie's, and Rister was too smart to tie any such evidence to himself. No chance of being picked up on these backroads at this time of the night. Nothing to do but hoof it to Meadows—about two miles, he judged it. The State highway ran past Meadows. He could get a lift to Rawlins there.

The flashlight! It was Maxie's, too. His arm jerked back and flung it far out over the marsh. Somehow, in letting go of it, his fingers must have pushed the switch. The bulb was burning as it flew up and arced down, a tiny fiery comet, toward the black waters. It struck with a faint splash, and the glimmer of light was instantly quenched as it sank.

A damn fool play, leaving it lit that way. But it didn't really matter. Nobody could have seen—these hicks went to bed at dusk and got up with the livestock. Rister knew—he'd lived that way himself once. No eyes but his own could have seen the flash. Damn the thing! Should have left it in the car.

He gripped the satchel tightly and set off at a fast walk. Anybody else might lose his way out here. But he knew the country. That was why he'd made Maxie cut through the swamps, on a pretended short-cut. The scheme had been growing in the back of his head ever since they'd left Chicago. And Marrow Marsh was the ideal spot to play it out.

Fifty grand!

The two miles were nothing. He recognized the bend of the road just outside Meadows, just as it had been when, as a kid, he'd hunted 'coon and beaver in this region. There was the familiar ramshackle feed store with its huge faded sign pale in the moonlight. In ten years the place hadn't changed. He guessed the people wouldn't have changed either. Maybe he was the only one who had. He wasn't the kid who had run away ten years ago from old Peter Akers.

Akers had been his guardian then, a hard, miserly old skinflint. There had always been stories about Akers, about reams of money hidden in the unpainted, weather-worn old house. Lies, Rister knew. There wasn't any money, never had been. He'd searched the place himself a dozen times. For all his stinginess Akers had never laid anything by. But the stories of a hidden hoard were just the kind folks swallowed around here. They'd live even after Akers was dead. Maybe he was. Rister felt a brief curiosity, no more. No use raking up the past. Alive or dead, Akers was no use to him.

THE TOWN was dead quiet—quiet as only a country hamlet can be in the witching hours after midnight. There was no wind, and cold moonlight showed the paltriness of the place in a sort of frozen stillness. General store, one-pump filling station, feed store with a tractor standing alongside, the old coach that served as railroad depot. All of them dark, as though they had been abandoned years ago. The highway, on which Rister had expected to see the bright flash of occasional headlights, was a narrow ribbon of cracked asphalt.

He swore, pulled a map from his pocket. Bright moonlight showed him his mistake. The highway *had* passed here; now it cut straight through Smoky Ridge. The asphalt ribbon ended here; there would be no through traffic. No chance for a lift here.

A foot crunched on gravel.

Rister spun around, faced the man squarely. He was a big fellow, much bigger than Rister. A floppy felt hat hid most of his face—a hard face, tense with desperation. Rister had seen faces like that at the gaming tables in Chicago. When he saw the club, a thick, knobby thing of peeled hardwood which the stranger held stiffly in one gnarled fist, he was suddenly afraid for himself and for the money he carried. Murder was so easy here.

And then, with an angry jerk of the head, he threw it off. He had a gun, more than a match for any club. This was just a backwoods hick, out for no good perhaps, but not dangerous—to him. And there were things he had to know. But he played safe by slipping his hand into his gun pocket first.

"Say, bud! My car bust down five miles out. I've been walking ever since. How about getting to Rawlins? Any bus or train this time of night?"

The man shook his head, ducked his chin down so that Rister could no longer see his face, and backed hastily away. In astonishment Roster watched him dodge behind the corner of the general store, heard him break into a run when out of sight. The sound died away rapidly.

Damned hick fool! Now what? There wouldn't be any bus at this hour, if ever. But there used to be a milk train at three in the morning that pulled an accommodation coach for men coming off the late shift at the mines back in the hills. Many the night he'd lain awake listening to it whistle through. Meadows was a flag stop and the train pulled up only if there was a passenger, which usually there wasn't. It was two fifty now. Might as well hang around the depot for ten minutes and rest up.

The deserted depot spoke eloquently of long neglect. Some of the end windows were boarded up, but the door was, as always, unlocked. There were the familiar old round-bellied stove and wooden benches. Outside, the platform boards were warped and split. Bits of old posters and timetables hung from rusty nails on the weather-beaten wall. There was nobody around, of course. There never had been an agent except during the yearly potato rush. You bought your ticket on the train.

He found the flag just where it had always been—propped on two rusty nails on the north wall. A five-foot pole with a rag of what had been red cloth on one end. Rister planted it in a heap of weed-overgrown gravel alongside the single track. It mightn't do any good, of course. Maybe the milk train didn't run on the same schedule any more.

Or maybe the mines were closed and it didn't take passengers, even on flag.

You waited, and found out. He sat down on the splintery platform, the satchel between his legs. The gloomy depot gave him the creeps. It was better out here, in the moonlight. Hell, what was the matter with him, anyway? He'd made it, hadn't he? Fifty grand in the satchel! Not hot money either—the boys he and Maxie had taken it from weren't the kind to advertise to the cops. Clean, unmarked bills. Fifty grand! Just twice what he'd have if Maxie were still with him. But Maxie was at the bottom of Marrow Marsh.

Damn that flashlight! Suppose somebody had seen it, came out to snoop around. And the big fellow with the club—dangerous, Rister knew. Supposing he sneaked up on him from behind? A club wouldn't make much noise. You could kill with a club, kill just as dead as with a gun. And there was fifty grand in the satchel. Rister could almost see the crisp green bills through the leather, almost fancied that the stranger could, too.

A THIN, wailing whistle knifed through the stillness, jerked his head toward the track. *Here she came!* The same old high-wheeled teakettle with an old wooden coach and a couple of freight cars trailing after. The huge old headlight was dark. That was the only difference.

The locomotive came drifting down on closed throttle, the bulk of her rocking in ungainly fashion from side to side, steam hissing in a soft *whoosh* from leaky fittings. He saw the gilt numbers on her cab—752—and the dark shadow of the engineer in the cab window. Brakes bit and chattered. He swung aboard before the wheels stopped turning. An unlit lantern lifted and fell farther back beside the cars. Air hissed off and the wheels picked up speed again.

The old wooden coach was empty. Red plush seats were rubbed bare in spots and none of the ceiling lights were burning. Rister sat down, wedging the satchel between him and the window. The clacking of wheels over rail joints grew swifter. Drawbars jerked, creaked, banged. Windows rattled in loose frames. Rister sat back, stared out over the moving, moonlit landscape.

He was safe now, but he still felt nervous, as if there were more danger ahead—danger against which the gun couldn't help. Nothing he could put his finger on. He'd played it safe, all through. Nobody had tailed them from Chicago. The cops had nothing on him. And Maxie and the car were safely hidden. Even if somebody had seen the flash, they couldn't find the car. Marrow Marsh kept its secrets. Whole teams and wagons had disappeared into its sucking, bottomless depths. Nothing to be scared of, that he could see.

But he was still scared anyway. He admitted that to himself. His nerves were whipped raw by the events of the night, by the unexpected, the things he hadn't—couldn't have—planned against. Things like the flashlight, and the man with the club. And this dark, rocking old coach that belonged back in the '80s. He looked up the aisle between the empty, threadbare seats, and quickly turned back to the window. The empty car gave him the creeps, just as the depot had.

Through the window he watched familiar landmarks slip by. The Springfield water tower. The Miller dairy farm. The Rankin homestead that he'd last seen the night he and Dave Rankin ran away, ten years ago. He didn't want to think about

Dave, and yet the memories came. A skinny, sandy-haired kid crazy to see the world, who'd listened big-eyed to Rister's plan and finally followed him. That was in '29.

They'd hoboed their way to Chicago. Prohibition got them their first jobs—running booze across the border by car. Big money for nineteen-year-old kids. Then the night Dave Rankin ran into a Federal trap. The fellow with him had lost his head and shot his way clear. But they'd taken Dave. They'd found a gun at his feet and matched its slugs against a couple found in the body of a Federal man. So Dave had burned for the killing, screaming until the last second that he hadn't done it. Rister couldn't think of it, even now, without a shudder.

He sat upright suddenly, his feet hitting the floor with a bang. Hell, he'd forgotten! This was Old Man Rankin's train—had been for years. The twice-a-day local run on the Rawlins-Somerville branch line. He didn't want to meet Rankin. The old man blamed him for what had happened to Dave.

AT THE REAR end of the coach a door slammed. A thin figure in a shiny blue uniform walked with tottering steadiness down the aisle. Old Man Rankin! Older and thinner than he had been ten years ago. Hands the color of wax paper, thin and bloodless, with which he grasped the cushions to steady himself.

"It's you, isn't it, Ben Rister?" He didn't seem surprised. His voice was flat, as if he had no feelings about anything any more. "I'm glad it's you. Ain't many that ride with us now."

"Us?" The single word stuck in Rister's throat. But to leave it unsaid would have been to invite silence. That, he felt, he could not endure. For in the silence there would have been only Rankin's eyes to seize, to hold his attention. And Rankin's eyes were queer.

"Cramer and me. He still runs the engine, you know. Same old 752. It's different now, of course. Everythings' different but Cramer and me and 752. I can't find my boy. Where is he, Ben? Where's Dave?"

Rankin's head was bent, his eyes on a level with Rister's own. Empty eyes, dull and lifeless as the dark headlight on the engine. And then Rister knew what was wrong. The old man was cracked! Funny they still let him have a train.

"You killed him," said Rankin. "You led him in evil ways. It's you has got his blood on you. My boy's blood."

"Shut up!" Crazy or not, that kind of talk got under a man's skin. "You don't know what you're talking about. Gimme a ticket to Rawlins."

The old man punched a pasteboard slip, but instead of giving it to Rister stuck it into the seam of the seat ahead.

"You had to come back, Ben. I been waiting for you, waiting for you to go the same way my boy went. You know that, Ben? You know you're going to die just like my Dave?"

The satchel prodded Rister. He moved away from it. God, the old fool couldn't know anything, could he? All the same, the whole thing was jinxed—the whole neat, foolproof scheme to get rid of Maxie and keep the fifty grand. First the flashlight, then the road being abandoned, and that fool at Meadows, running as if he'd seen a ghost—and now Old Man Rankin. But he couldn't know anything. The guy was just cracked. Plain crazy.

"*They* killed his body," that flat,

toneless voice went on, "but you killed *him*. That was worse. Much worse than killing flesh and blood. Flesh and blood, they're just something worn by what's inside, the mind, the soul." Rankin leaned over and pointed to Rister's chest. "Your soul made that. Blood and bone and gristle, yes. Iron and steam and brass. They're none of them as real as a man's soul, even the meanest and smallest of them all. Because the Creator makes *that*. And you killed Dave's soul. That's why you've got to pay, Ben."

Rister stood up. His throat was hot. There was a burn on his lips and his hands were hot and dry. He wanted to hit Rankin, wanted to smash that thin-lipped, bloodless mouth until it cried for mercy. Jinx? Here was his jinx—this gibbering old fool!

"Shut up, Rankin! Shut up or, by God, I'll shut you up for keeps. Get out of here."

The old man's burned-out eyes crossed with Rister's. They were dead, those eyes—cold and dull and dead. He shivered under their glance, and sat down again. They were queer, those eyes—as if they knew so much, and weren't telling. As if they'd seen more than life. He stared out of the window to get away from them.

SOMEHOW Rankin must have left without making a sound, for when Rister looked again the aisle was empty. Sere moonlight lit the old coach patchily, slanted skeleton shadows of the window frames across the floor. He shivered again as his eyes traveled the files of those gaunt, upright, empty seats. He decided it was the noises, the unliving moving noises of this old car, in which he, himself silent, was the only living thing. What right had dead things to make so much noise? He cursed the sounds—the screech and rattle of windows in worn grooves, the jar of couplings, the monotonous *click-clack* of wheels, and from ahead the asthmatic, wheezing exhaust of the ancient engine. Two hours to Rawlins. He wished sleep were possible, and knew he had never been more wide awake in all his life.

But later it was the silence that got on his nerves. Dead silence, that made the dead noises louder. That and the darkness, the gaunt moon-shadowed darkness here where there should have been the yellow glow of lamps. Better if it had been altogether dark, so that he couldn't see the bare ribs of the old car, moonlit as they now were. Better if there had been even one other passenger, even a drunk snoring away on the end seat. A snore was a human, living thing, and could drown out, or at least disguise, any number of dead sounds. Rister wished he had a drink. He began even to wish that Rankin would come back.

Two hours to Rawlins. A good automobile could have made the trip in an hour. But the local was slow because it was a local. Two hours between Meadows and Rawlins.

Ages later the train slowed down for the Rawlins yard. Rister couldn't remember where else it had stopped, or even if it had stopped at all, but he knew Rawlins by the terra cotta works alongside the track. And then Rankin came back, his frail black figure shuffling with practiced caution down the aisle.

At the sight of him Rister stood up. His knees felt cramped and shaky. Under his shirt he felt a cold trickle of sweat down his spine. His moist fingers slipped on the satchel handle. The train was already jerking to a stop, although they were

still several hundred yards from the station.

"You'll have to get off here," said Rankin tonelessly. "We aren't allowed to pull into the depot any more. But it's an easy walk to the Bramley House."

He peered at Rister with those pale, burnt-out eyes of his. "That's where you'll be staying the night. The Bramley House. They'll find you there. You'll want me to help you then, but there won't be no help for you, Ben. That's how you'll pay for what you done to Dave—"

His monotonous, passionless voice followed Rister to the vestibule, echoed in his ears as he leaped to the gravel ballast. Behind him the engine bell tolled mournfully, growing fainter as he hurried across the half a dozen tracks that made up the Rawlins yard.

He paused by the fence to look back. The train was already gone, its noises vanished on the still, moonlit night. On silvery rails gleamed reflections of switch lamps, long red and green daggers of light. Townward a switch engine chuffed noisily, flanges squealed and cars coupled with a sudden echoing crash.

Three matches he used to light a cigarette, although the night was windless. Damn Rankin! The old fool had gotten on his nerves, with his talk about Davey and—other things. Almost as if he knew about Maxie. He couldn't, of course. But it made a man jittery, meeting Rankin tonight of all nights, like a ghost out of the past.

Ghost, hell! You had to get a grip on yourself, not let your mind run away with you. The old man was half crazy. He'd even forgotten to collect a fare for the ride, although he'd punched a ticket. It just went to show how far gone he was. Anyway, that was all done with. He wouldn't see Rankin again.

Rister turned into the street. The cigarette and the quiet night air soothed his jumpy nerves until he marveled that Rankin had ever bothered him. A bell tolled five o'clock. He lit a second cigarette and ground the first under his heel. Time to get some shut-eye. By this time tomorrow he aimed to be a long way from here.

A neon light a block away flashed the legend "Cosmopolitan Hotel." Rister walked into the lobby, aroused a sleepy desk clerk, and signed the register with a flourish. So he was going to stop at the Bramley House, was he? The hell with Rankin and his talk!

"Mr. Rister?" yawned the clerk. "Glad to have you with us. Garage's out in back, if you want to store your car."

Rister started. What made the fool think he had a car? But probably most people did, and the clerk asked as a matter of course. Still, it wouldn't hurt to make it plain that he had no car, that he hadn't come here by automobile. He wanted no possible connection with the one in Marrow Marsh.

"No car," he told the clerk. "Matter of fact, I came in on the Somerville local just now. A jerkwater line if there ever was one."

"Yeah," remarked the clerk, with a sharp glance. "Here's your key, Mr. Rister. Room 26, two flights. Take your bag?"

"Thanks, no." He flung a bill down. "Call me at two and send up some lunch. I'll be leaving right after."

"Right-o. Good night."

It seemed to Rister that the clerk's knowing eyes followed him up to the first stair landing. Then he cursed his nervousness. The jinx was

broken, wasn't it? The flashlight, the stranger at Meadows, old Rankin's gibberish, all meant nothing. And he hadn't stopped at the Bramley House, if there was such a place.

In ten minutes he was sound asleep.

THE KNOCK on the door grew into a pounding until he sleepily responded. He got up, dressed, was ready for the meal when it came. He asked for a timetable and found a train out of Rawlins at three thirty. In the bright light of day last night seemed unreal and far off. If there had been a jinx it was gone now. He was as good as on his way, with fifty grand in his bag and no strings attached.

And then he saw the ad. It was a small box advertisement on the back of the timetable, and said simply: "Cosmopolitan Hotel. For discriminating guests." What stiffened him in his chair was the fine-type addition: "Formerly the Bramley House."

It was just coincidence, he told himself fiercely. Screwier things than that happened all the time. They just *happened*. Nobody could know about them in advance. And they didn't mean anything. Not a thing.

There was another knock on the door. Not the waiter this time, but two men. They came in without invitation.

"Ben Rister?" asked one, and as Rister nodded flung back his lapel to show a badge. "I'm Sheriff Beams. Like to ask you a few questions, Rister."

He could feel his heart pounding, thudding horribly. They couldn't know. Marrow Marsh kept its secrets. Hadn't he picked it for that? They couldn't know a thing. But his brain was afire with fear and he remembered what old Rankin had said. "That's where you'll be staying. The Bramley House. They'll find you there."

"What d'you want?" he asked harshly.

"Been in town long, Rister?" asked the sheriff, slipping into a chair.

"Since last night late," snapped Rister. They'd know that from the clerk by now. "Why?"

"We're just checking up. You were raised around here, weren't you?"

"Meadows. Left ten years ago. What d'you—"

"The clerk tells me you may have come through Meadows last night. Didn't stop to see your old guardian, Peter Akers, did you?"

It cracked in Rister's brain like a snarl of thunder. All of a sudden he knew exactly what had happened. The pieces fitted together only too well—the jumpy stranger with the club, at Meadows, and Peter Akers, and the fortune he was supposed to have hidden away in the old house—all the talk and whispering of years. And only he, Ben Rister, knew it was empty lie on empty lie.

"You've guessed it, haven't you," said the sheriff gently. His eyes were intent on Rister's face. "You know he's been killed."

"I haven't been near him," Rister snarled. "I never touched him. I knew he didn't have a dime. What would I want to kill him for?"

Silence gaped back at him, a sullen quiet that clamored with accusing, voiceless tongues. And then the sheriff said coldly: "How did you know he'd been killed?"

Rister sat up straight, his hands knotted about the arms of his chair. God, he was talking himself into the chair this way. Had to be careful.

"He must have been, or you wouldn't be out asking questions about him. All that talk about him

having money around—I always knew it would make trouble. I know he didn't have a dime, but talk like that always makes trouble, sooner or later."

That was better. After all, they had nothing on him, couldn't prove anything against him. They couldn't prove he'd killed old Akers, because he hadn't.

"So you didn't see him?" said the sheriff. "What time did you pass through Meadows?"

"Three o'clock."

"We know it happened about four," said Beams. "Got anybody who can swear you left at three?"

THE LOAD rolled off Rister's mind. He almost laughed in relief. It was easier than he'd hoped. They had nothing on him. Not a thing.

"Sure. Ask old Rankin, conductor on the five-o'clock local. I rode in with him. He'll tell you I was on board from three to five."

The other man looked at the sheriff. "That's just like the clerk told us," he said, as if astonished.

"Sure it is," Rister went on. "It's a straight story. You find Old Man Rankin and ask—"

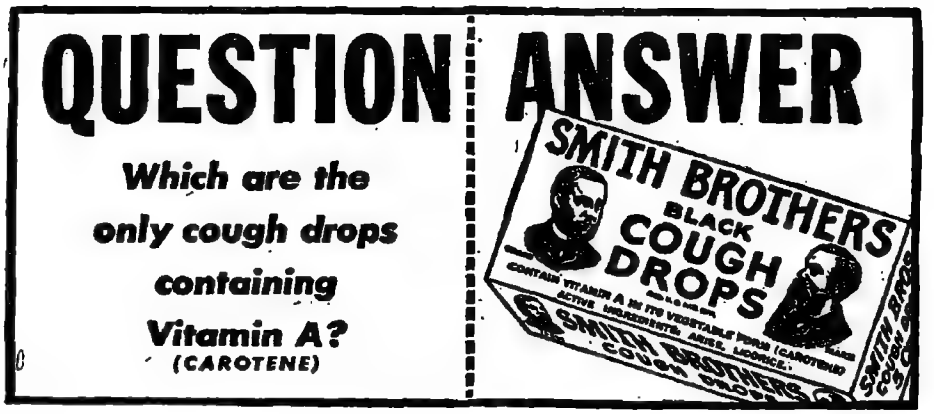
The sheriff was standing beside him. There was a flash of bright metal and something cold on Risters' hands. He jumped up and the sheriff pushed him back into the chair.

"Find the bag, Eddie." He turned cold eyes upon Rister. "You sticking by that story, or you want to spill? We checked on you as far as Chicago. The game's up, Rister."

The touch of the handcuffs kindled a cold fire in his skull, a chill that coursed down his spine. They knew about Maxie—

"Want me to tell it for you, Rister? You and an accomplice drove down from Chicago—we had all morning to find that out, and plenty of witnesses. The two of you killed Akers at four this morning, drove here in an hour—it's an easy trip in a fast car—and split up here, planning to get together again later. We lost the other chap, with the car, but we've got you. You lived with Akers as a kid. You figured you could get his cash, and the old man caught you. So you killed him. That's why you said you had no car, but you should have thought up a better one than that train story. How about the bag, Eddie?"

"Got it!" said the other man. He fumbled with the lock, pulled the handles apart. A low whistle puckered his lips. He brought the bag over so that the sheriff could see in-



side it. Rister shot up out of the chair.

"That's mine! I brought it down with me. Akers never had any money. I'm telling the truth! Why don't you ask old Rankin?"

The sheriff slowly closed the bag.

"It's no use, Rister. That story you told the clerk was what tipped us off, when we checked all the hotels for suspects this morning. That, and your name, and the fact that Akers had been your guardian. But we'd never have caught on if you hadn't lied stupidly. Why the hell did you say you rode in on the local?"

"Because I did!" shrieked Rister. "So help me God, I'm telling the truth—I rode the local in, and Rankin saw me. It takes two hours from Meadows to Rawlins and I was on it all the time. Ask Rankin. I couldn't have killed Akers at four because I was on the train when it happened."

Beams and the other man looked at each other queerly. The sheriff took a folded paper out of his vest pocket and thrust it into Rister's trembling hands. It was a newspaper clipping, the date five years old:

> April 30, 1934: Engine 752, pulling what was scheduled to be the last train ever to run between Somerville and Rawlins, following permission of the Interstate Commerce Commission to abandon the unprofitable branch line, last night struck a spread rail and jumped the track while crossing a fill above Marrow Marsh. The engine and the single passenger coach directly behind it sank almost immediately, carrying with them William Cramer, the engineer, and Conductor James Rankin. The fireman and two brakemen jumped in time to save themselves.
>
> A wrecking crew labored for six hours to recover the bodies of Rankin and Cramer, both veterans of thirty years service. The coach and engine will be abandoned to the marsh.

The room was big with a roaring silence. A flush, first of heat and then of cold, seemed to shrivel Rister's skull. The faces of the sheriff and the other man loomed above him, hideous, inhuman.

"It's a frame!" he shrieked. "You had this printed. You're trying to trick me. But I won't be framed! I rode with Rankin. That's how I got here!"

The sheriff shook his head.

"You can't make it stick, Rister. Better tell us where to find your pal—and the car. You couldn't make a kid believe you rode a train between Meadows and Rawlins last night."

Beams smiled grimly.

"Kids know better. They walk the ties when they go hunting in the marsh, just the ties, most of the way. Because, from here to a mile this side of Meadows, they pulled up the rails to use elsewhere—five years ago."

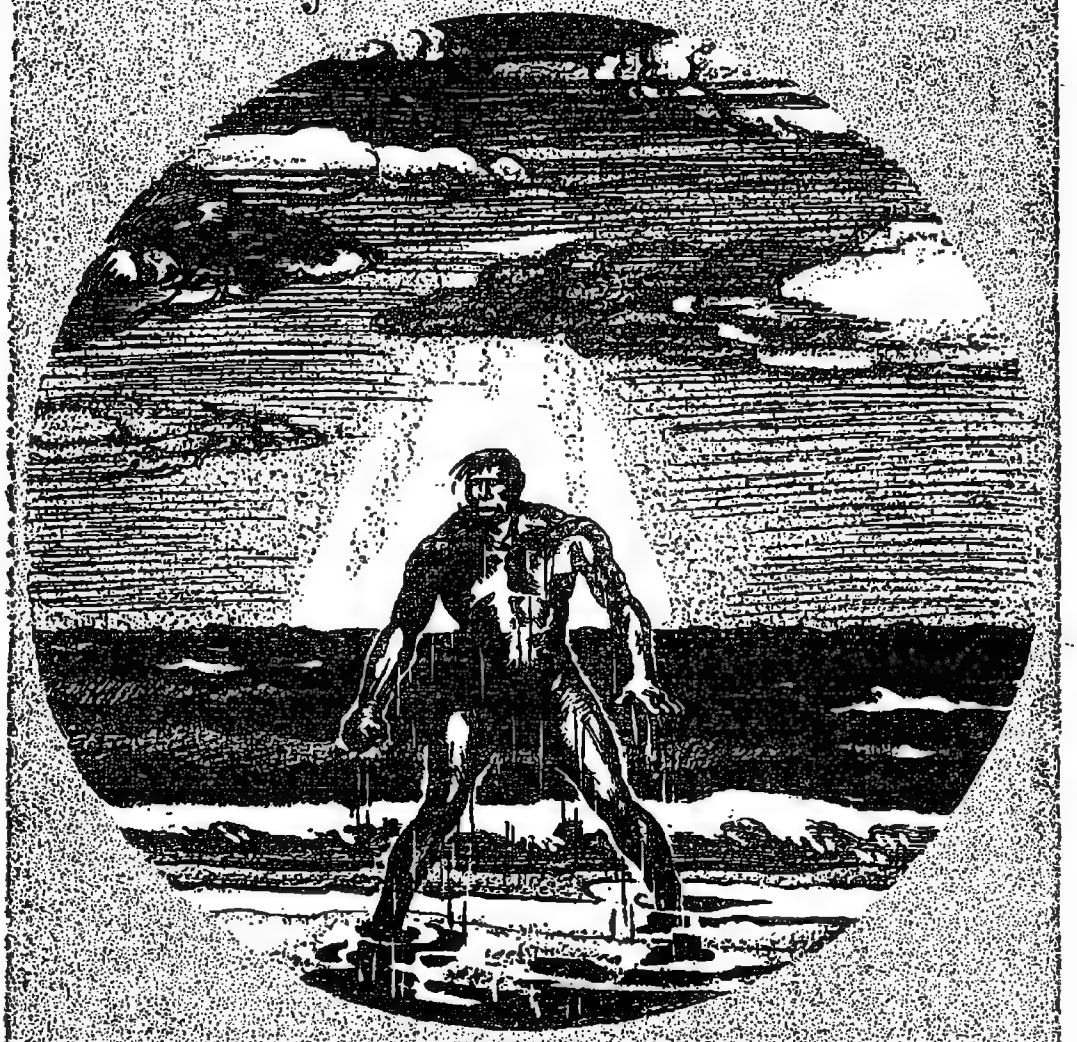
You may miss "Death's Deputy,"

coming next month in UNKNOWN, but—

WILL HE MISS YOU?

THE SEA THING

by A. E. VAN VOGT



THE SEA THING

by A. E. VAN VOGT

The white man knows everything—and the native little. Whereby, sometimes, the native knows more—

Illustrated by Orban

THE thing scrambled out of the water and stood for a moment swaying gently on its human legs, as if intoxicated. Odd how blurred everything was; its mind blackened by mist, it fought to adjust itself to its human body and to the cool, wet feel of the sand under its feet.

Behind it, the waves whispered against the moonlit beach. And ahead—

It felt a queer uncertainty as it stared into the shadow world ahead; an unwillingness, a vast melancholy reluctance to leave the edge of the water. A dragging uneasiness writhed along the fish nerves of its human body, as it realized that its deadly yet all-necessary purpose left no alternative but to go ahead. No fear could ever touch that cold fish brain, and yet—

The thing quivered, as the deep, hoarse guffaw of a man jarred the sullen night air. The sound carried on the slow, warm, trade wind, queerly distorted by distance—a disembodied bellow of laughter that stabbed from the other side of the coral island through semidarkness of the moon-filled night. A raucous, arrogant laugh, it was, that brought an answering thickness to the creature's throat. An icy, ruthless sneer squeezed the lines of the thing's human face until, for a brief, horrible moment, it was a tiger shark's face that grimaced there, a hard, ferocious head that barely held its human shape. Steely teeth clicked with the metallic snap of a shark lashing forth at its prey.

With a quivering gasp, the creature drew breath into its human mouth and down its human throat. The air felt suddenly, strangely, unpleasantly dry and hot after that brief moment of semireversion to a fish state—a harsh, strangling sensation that brought a racking paroxysm of cough choking up in a mist of white foam. It clutched at its neck with its hard human fingers, and stood for a horrible moment fighting the darkness out of its brain.

Stinging rage against this human body it had put on burned a shivering course along its cold fish nerves. It *hated* this new form—this helpless thing of legs and arms, small, horrible construction of globular head and snakelike neck, fastened precariously to an almost solid chunk of weak flesh and bone. Not only was it almost useless in water, but it seemed useless for any other purpose as well.

The thought fled, as, with muscles tensed, it stared across the dim reaches of the island. In the near distance, blackness piled up fantastically into deeper blackness—trees! There were other clumps of blackness in the farther distance, but it was too hard to see whether they were trees or hills—or buildings!

One was unmistakably a building. A pale, yellow-orange light gleamed

from an opening in its low, spreading bulk. As the thing watched with grim eyes, a shadow passed before the light. The shadow of a man!

These white men were a hardy lot, incredibly different from the brown natives of the nearby islands. It was not yet dawn, yet they were risen from sleep, preparing for the labors of the day.

The thing spat with a sudden ferocity of hate, as the thought of those labors poured like molten fire through its brain. Its human lips parted in a hideous grin of uncontrollable rage at these human beings who dared to hunt and kill sharks.

Let them keep to the land and live on the land where they belonged. The sea—this wild and great sea—was not for their kind; and of all the things of the sea, the shark lords were the sacred, the untouchables. Nothing else mattered, but *they* must not be systematically hunted. Self-defense was the first law of nature!

With a snarl of unutterable fury, the thing strode along the stretching away of gray-dark shore, then headed inland, straight toward where the yellow light blinked palely out into the false dawn of early, early morning.

THE SINKING, bloated moon rode the waters to the west, as Corliss heaved his square-built body up the sharp embankment that led from the water's edge, where he had washed himself, to the cook's building. The man ahead of him, Progue, the Dutchman, stepped into the shack's doorway, and his thick body almost blotted out the sickly yellow lamp glow that came from within.

Corliss heard the deep bellow that burst from Progue's throat: "Isn't breakfast ready yet? You've been sleeping in again, you lily-livered slob!"

Corliss swore to himself. In a kind of a way, he liked the tremendous Dutchman, but the man could be annoying in his swift and terrific tempers. The leader called sharply: "Shut up, Progue!"

Progue turned in the doorway and grunted: "When I'm hungry, Corliss, I'm hungry; and blast his cockney soul for keeping me waiting. I—"

He stopped, and Corliss could see his head jerk sideways. The man's eyes glowed with a faint, yellow light, as he stared at the pale, bloodless ball of moon. His voice held a queer, urgent pitch when he spoke:

"Corliss, we're all here, the whole sixteen of us, aren't we? On this side of the island, I mean!"

"We were a minute ago," the leader replied wonderingly. "I saw the whole gang pile out of the bunkhouse and start washing up. Why?"

Progue snapped tensely: "Just watch that moon. Maybe he'll do it again."

The Dutchman's vast body grew so rigid with the intentness of his stare that, briefly, Corliss throttled down his questions. He followed the man's gaze.

The seconds dragged by; an eerie sense of unreality crept over Corliss. The island in the immediate foreground was a dark mass, except where the gloomy, white moon path lay in a thick, somber swath across the silent, dark land.

Beyond the island, he could see the dark glint of the lagoon waters, the darker ocean beyond, and the way the white, mysterious moonbeams made a road of light into the remote distance of that immensity of water.

Incredible vista it was in that night under that blue-dark southern

sky. The *lap, lap* of the water against the sand of the shore; the faint, distant, sullen roar of the breakers, when the waves pounded their tireless strength against the shallow line of rocks that formed a jagged, guardian ring around the island. The breakers themselves, visible in the darkness, a long scatter of glittering white, like broken glass, that swirled and plunged, and broke and fought, and roared and smashed the eternal, bitter battle of the sea against the land.

And over everything hung the brooding night sky; the moon, so bright and white and sated-looking, sinking sluggishly behind the ocean to the west.

With an effort, Corliss, tore his mind back to the Dutchman, as Prague half whispered:

"I could have sworn—I do swear I saw a man silhouetted against the moon!"

Corliss threw off the spell of that early, early morning. He snapped: "You're crazy! A man here, in this the loneliest waste of the lonely Pacific. You're seeing things!"

"Maybe I am!" Prague muttered. "The way you put it, it does sound crazy."

He turned reluctantly, and Corliss followed him in to breakfast.

THE CREATURE slowed instinctively, as the yellow-orange glow from the doorway washed across its feet. Men's voices spilled out the door, a low, deep murmur of conversation. There was a clatter of other sounds and the blurred scent of strange foods.

The thing hesitated the barest moment, then walked full into the sickly glow of that light. Tensely, it stepped through the open doorway, and stood blinking with fish eyes at the scene that spread before it.

Sixteen men sat around a large table, their needs being served by a seventeenth.

It was this serving man, a scrawny, horrible caricature of a man in a greasy white apron, who looked up straight into the creature's eyes.

"Blimey!" he ejaculated. "If 'tain't a bloomin' stranger! Where the devil are you from?"

Sixteen heads bobbed up. And thirty-two eyes, cold and hard with surprise and speculation, stared at the thing. Under that alert scrutiny, it felt a vague unease, a distant sense of alarm, a cold premonition that these men were going to be more difficult to murder than it had anticipated.

THE MOMENT lengthened into seconds; and the thing suddenly had the weird impression that, not a few, but a million eyes swayed and gleamed there before it—a million searching, suspicious eyes that blurred and wavered, and yet held a hard, glittery stare. The thing fought off the feeling; and it was then that, from deep within itself, came the first disturbing reaction to the question the little cockney had asked. Even as the unpleasant glimmer of thought quivered at the doors of its brain, another man asked the question:

"Where did you come from?"

Come from! The question beat a vague path in the thing's brain. Why, from the sea, of course! Where else? In all these wild, dark miles, there was only the sea, and the waves that rose and fell in their ceaseless rhythm—glittering like cut gems in the eternity of sunlit days, turgid and morose in the nights! The primeval sea that whispered and rippled and hinted blackly of things indescribable.

"Well!" rapped Prague, before

Corliss could speak, "haven't you got a tongue? Who are you? Where're you from?"

"I—" the creature began lamely. "I—"

A stunned dismay was creeping along those icy fish nerves. It seemed suddenly incredible that it had prepared no explanation. Where *had* it come from that would satisfy the harsh, shrewd minds of these men?

"Why, I—" it started again hopelessly. Frantically, it searched its memory for things it had heard could happen to men. A picture came of a boat, and of what a boat could experience. Its voice stabbed forth eagerly: "M-my boat . . . overturned. I was rowing and—"

"A rowboat!" Progue snorted. The big Dutchman sounded to Corliss as if his intelligence had been utterly outraged by such an explanation. "Why, you dirty liar. A rowboat a thousand miles from the nearest port! What're you up to? What're you tryin' to put over? Who do you think you're fooling?"

"Pipe down, Progue!" Corliss snapped. "Can't you see what's happened to this chap?"

He lifted his magnificent and commanding bulk of body out of his chair and came around the table. He grabbed a towel from the towel rack and tossed it to the creature. "Here, stranger, dry the chill off your body with this!"

He faced the table of men, half-accusingly. "Can't you see, he's been through hell! Think of swimming out there in these shark-infested waters and accidentally hitting this island. He must have gone nearly crazy. His mind did go a little, his memory snapped. Amnesia, they call it. Here are some dry togs, stranger!"

Corliss jerked an old pair of trousers and a rough gray shirt from a hook, and watched as the creature gingerly climbed into them.

"Hey," said a man, "he's putting the pants on backwards."

"You can see," said Corliss grimly, as the thing hesitantly corrected its mistake, "how far gone he was. Doesn't even know any more how to dress. At least, he understands. Here, stranger, sit down here, and stow some hot food under your belt. It ought to go good after what you've been through."

THE ONLY vacant space was across from Progue; the thing sank hesitantly into the chair and—as hesitantly—tackled the plateful of food the cook set before it, using the fork and knife, as it had seen the others do.

Progue grumbled: "I don't like the looks of this guy! Those eyes! He may be a weak-minded baby now, but I'll bet he was so tough he was tossed overboard from a passing ship. Those eyes give me the shivers!"

"Shut up!" Corliss roared in abrupt fury. "None of us are to blame for our appearance, for which you should be damned thankful."

"Bah!" said Progue. He went on, muttering words that came to Corliss in a disconnected stream. "If I was boss . . . believe me, this outfit . . . a damned crime . . . when I don't trust a man it's a cinch . . . probably the mate on some tramp steamer . . . so tough he was heaved over—"

"That's impossible!" said Corliss flatly. "No tramp steamers pass this way. There'll not be a steamer until ours arrives five months from now. This fellow's explanation, though blurred, is clear enough. He was in a rowboat; and you know as well as I do there are some larger

islands to the south of us, with small native populations and some whites. He could have come from there."

"Yaah!" snarled Progue, his beefy face aflame with ugly color. Corliss recognized the stubborn streak that sometimes made the big Dutchman unmanageable. "Well, I don't like him, see! Do you hear that, you?"

The thing looked up, a vague yet burning rage pulsing through its alien brain. It saw, in this man's hostility, the danger to its purpose, a suspicious mind, questioning its every action. The creature's throat thickened and drooled forth a snarl of feral hate.

"Yes," it snapped from its human mouth. "I hear!"

With a single lunge, it was on its feet. All in one incredibly swift movement, it reached across the table, caught Progue's shirt where it bulged open at his great neck—and jerked!

The Dutchman bellowed his fury, as that steel strength tore him clear off the floor, smashed his body across the table, and flung him in a single, sweeping motion headfirst out of the door.

Half a dozen dishes clattered to the cement floor, but they were made of tough clay and none broke.

A man said in an awed voice: "He may be weak-minded, but now I can understand how he could swim maybe miles."

Amid dead silence, then, the creature sat down, and began to eat again. Its brain was swirling with the murderous desire to leap after the stunned man and tear him to bits. With a horrible effort, it controlled that wild and flaming lust. It recognized that it had made a good impression on these hard men.

To Corliss, the silence was a weighted thing. The yellow-orange light that flooded from the lamps which hung down from the ceiling did queer, ghastly things to the strained faces around the rough table. It was only with half his mind that he noticed the light of dawn was trickling through the window at his left, spilling in a dingy pool on the floor.

From outside came the scraping sound of Progue furiously picking himself off the packed dirt. It was an angry noise, fraught with a sense of violence, the rage of a violent, unruly nature frenzied by humiliation. And yet, Corliss knew, the big Dutchman was unpredictable. Anything could happen.

Briefly, Corliss held his breath, as Progue's scowling face peered in at the door. Then the man came in, his whole great body towering there. Corliss said sharply, his voice deep with command:

"Progue, don't start anything if you want to keep my respect."

The Dutchman flashed a terrible look at him, his face dark and glowering: "I'm starting nothing. I had that coming to me. But I still don't like his eyes. That's all."

He went around the table; and it was odd, Corliss thought, that in spite of the ease with which the stranger had handled him, the big man had lost none of the respect of the others. There was no feeling that Progue had backed down from fear, for it was only too obvious that fear was not in him.

He grunted into his chair and began to shovel food into his mouth at a mad pace. Corliss echoed the sigh that went up from the men—an audible noise like a faint hiss. He had had visions of a cook shack smashed to a shambles.

One of the men—the swarthy Frenchman, Perratin—said hastily, and the very haste suggested that he was as much anxious to ease the

tense atmosphere as to say what he had to say:

"Boss, I think a couple of us ought to go see if that monster we saw yesterday has come to the surface yet. I'll absolutely swear, and *le bon Dieu* be my witness, that I got him right between the eyes."

"Monster!" a tall, thin-faced, thin-bodied man exclaimed from the end of the table. "What's all this?"

"Seen from boat number two!" Corliss explained succinctly. "Perratin was telling me about it last night, but I was rather sleepy. Something about a big creature with flippers like a devilfish."

"*Sacré du Nom!*" cried Perratin. "The devilfish is a harmless baby compared to this fellow. He was all gray-blue, hard to see, I mean, and had a shark's head and tail, both long and vicious—" He broke off abruptly. "What's the matter with you, Brains? The way your eyes are goggling means you've seen one of these before."

"Not seen, but heard of!" the tall, thin-bodied Englishman said slowly.

There was something so queer in the way he spoke that Corliss looked at him sharply. He had a deep respect for Brains Stapley. The man was reputed to be a university graduate; his past was a mystery, but that was nothing unusual; everyone in the room had a past of some kind.

Stapley went on: "You may not realize it, Perratin, but what you're describing is the natural form of the mythical shark god. I never thought to hear of such a thing actually existing—"

"For Heaven's sake," somebody cut in, "are we gonna listen to a bunch of native superstitions? Go on, Perratin."

PERRATIN looked at the thin-bodied Stapley with the quiet respect that he and some of the others had for the man; then, as Stapley was silent, apparently lost in thought, he said:

"It was Denton who saw him first. You tell 'em, Denton."

Denton was a smallish man with lively black eyes and a quick, jerky voice. He took up the refrain in his choppy way:

"Like Perratin said, Corliss, we were sittin' there in the boat, the big chunk of meat bait dangling well into the water. We had to take the dark meat yesterday, you know, and you know how scary sharks act with the dark stuff. Well, that's the way it was. They just cruised around, almost mad with the smell of the meat, but scared because it was dark. I guess there were fifteen of 'em when I saw the flash in the water—and this creature came up.

"He wasn't alone, either. Had a bunch of hammerheads with him—biggest, most dangerous-looking sharks I've ever laid eyes on. Great, big, long fellows, with those wicked heads, you know, and torpedo bodies—we shot a couple of 'em, so you saw 'em, too. Anyway, this big flipper fellow was swimming in the center of 'em like a king.

"Well, there was nothing really surprising about that. We've seen swordfish cruising around with sharks, and all kinds of sharks hanging around together, just as if they knew they was related; though, come to think of it, I've never seen a devilfish with sharks; and the devilfish belongs to the shark family.

"Anyway, there he was, big as life. He stopped and looked at that bait we had in the water; and then, just as if to say, 'What are you fellows scared of?' he just dived right at it, and that was that. The whole pack

made a beeline for the meat and starts chawing away like merry hell —just what we'd been waitin' for."

Corliss noticed that the stranger was staring at Denton with an intent, fascinated stare. For the briefest moment, he understood Progue's repelled feeling at the man's eyes. He fought the emotion down and said:

"Denton means that we've found, once sharks attack, they lose all fear, no matter how many of their fellows are killed thereafter. Our whole industry here—we want their amazingly tough hides—is built on that fact."

The stranger looked at him, as if to indicate that he understood.

Denton went on: "Well, that's what happened. As soon as the water stopped boiling from their movements, we started picking them off with—"

Perratin broke in eagerly: "It was then I noticed the big fellow had moved off to one side and was just watching us—that's the way it looked to me, anyway. I tell you he just lay there, his eyes cold and hard and calm—and he watched what we were doing; so I let him have it right between the eyes. He jumped like a mule that's been stung, and then dropped into the depths like a lead weight.

"I tell you I got him, boss, and he'll be floating on the surface by now; a couple of us ought to go out and tow him in."

"Hm-m-m!" frowned Corliss, his strong, tanned face dark with thought. "We can't really spare more than one man. You'd have to take the small boat."

The creature was quivering, a deep, internal throb of unutterable ferocity, as it stared at Perratin. This was the man who had fired the weapon that had struck it such a staggering blow. Its every nerve shrank in brief, horrible memory of the stunning pain of that one smash in the head. Its mind soared with the awful hunger of rage to leap at the man. Only by sheer physical effort did it fight down that ravening eagerness, and it said in a thin voice:

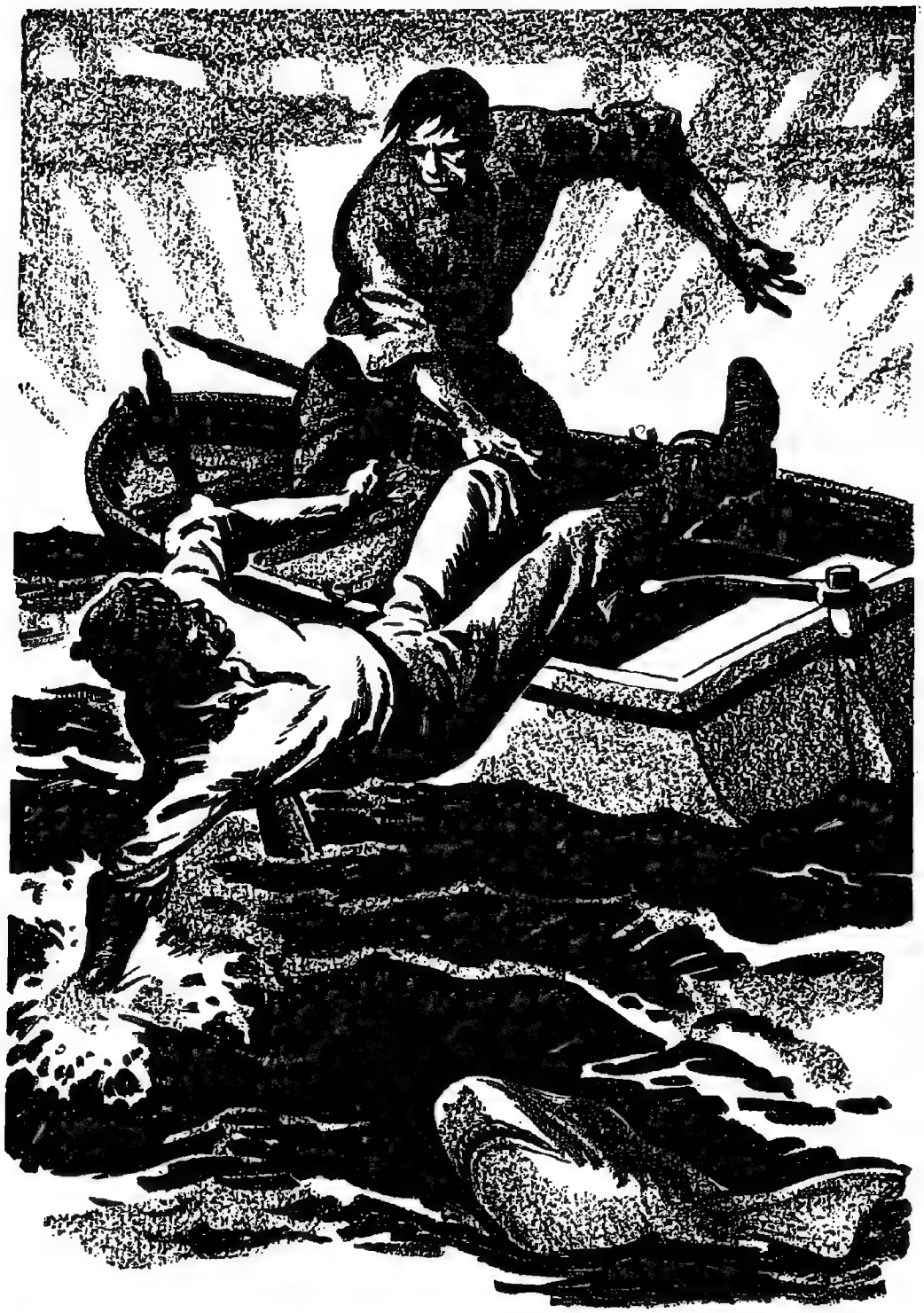
"I'll be only too glad to go along and help him. I might as well be earning what I eat here. I can help in any of the physical work."

"Why, thanks!" said Corliss, and he hoped that Progue felt properly ashamed of his suspicions of the stranger, after such a good-will offer. "And, incidentally, seeing as we can't find out your real name, we'll call you Jones. Now, let's get going. Hard day ahead!"

As THE THING followed the men into the muggy gloom of early dawn, it thought rapaciously: "It's easier than I expected!" And it retched a little from the flaming fever of its desire. Its steel muscles vibrated tautly with hellish glee at the very idea of what was going to happen to the man when the two of them were alone in the small boat.

Shaking with the pure, unadulterated passion of its blood hunger, it followed the men—followed them over the spongy grass, through a dim shadowland toward where a projection of land jutted out into the gray waters of the lagoon. A building loomed there, a long, low bulk that dissolved itself presently into a one-story wooden structure with a platform running out into the water.

From this building, there came a stench. As the first wave of that incredible, piercing smell struck the thing, it stopped short. Dead shark! The tart odor of decaying fish. The thing started dizzily forward again. Its brain was whirling with a mad



Safely out of sight of land, the thing hurled the man overboard, to his friends cruising in the waters—

surge of flaming thoughts, and as that stink grew stronger and stronger, that unwholesome stream of thoughts grew wilder and more violent with each passing moment.

It stared at the men's backs with hot, glittering eyes, fighting the devil impulse to leap at the nearest man and sink razor-sharp teeth into his soft neck, and then slash at the next man with a ferocious, murder strength, tearing him to bits before the others could even realize what was going on.

And when they did realize—the monster's lips parted in a silent snarl of inhuman hate. For a bare instant, it almost succumbed to the fury of its lust to kill; it throbbed in every nerve with horrible fascination at the thought of smashing in among the men and ripping the life from each weak body.

Surging memory stopped that insane impulse. Remembrance that its body, too, was human now, and correspondingly weak. An attack against these hard, experienced men would be pure suicide at this stage.

WITH a start, the thing saw that Perratin had fallen back level with it. He was saying: "You and me go this way, Jones. That's a good name, Jones is. Covers up a lot—like Perratin! Anyway, you and me take this little boat here. We've got a hard row ahead of us. We'll just cruise straight west. That's the best way to get out, too. Some pretty dangerous rock splits the lagoon into several sections; we'll have to edge along the shore for a ways to get by them, and then out through the break in the breakers that surround the island. Ha, that's funny, isn't it? Break in the breakers! Get it, Jones?"

Funny!—thought the thing. Funny! What was funny, and why? It wondered if it was supposed to make some answer to what was obviously at least half a question. It grew tense with the thought that, if it did not answer, this man might become suspicious—just now when he was walking into a trap. Slowly, the creature relaxed, as the swarthy little man put the oars in the boat and cried:

"Get in! Get in!"

Out in the water, it was still dark, but the waves were turning a strangely beautiful blue shade, as the dawn crept forward toward sunrise, and the eastern sky grew brighter and brighter until the whole horizon was a dazzle of brilliance.

Abruptly, the first blaze of sun sparkled across the waters, and Perratin said:

"How about you takin' the oars for a while? Two hours is a long row for one guy!"

As they crowded past each other in the narrow confines of the boat, the thing thought with burning intensity: "Now!"

Then it paused. They were too close to the island. The island lay behind them on its bed of water, glistening like an emerald in a platinum setting, with the sun directly behind it. The whole world of ocean was a shining, gorgeous spectacle, dominated by that ball of red fire resting its full circle now on the heaving horizon of water.

Perratin exclaimed: "*Mon Dieu*, but there are a lot of sharks around! I've seen two dozen in the last two minutes. The men should have come out this way again today."

He fingered the long gun he held. "Maybe I ought to ping a few, and we could tow 'em in. I got plenty of rope."

A surging shock stabbed through the monster, as it realized the man had a gun. Swift alarm burned

along its alien nerves. The gun made a difference. A damnable difference! The thing was conscious of a brief wave of fury that it had so readily taken over the oars, leaving the man's hands free. Somehow, their present positions dimmed the certainty of the man being easy prey.

The sun was hours higher in the sky, the island a dark spot on that living waste of water, when Perratin said:

"Should be about here. Keep your eyes peeled, Jones. If those blasted sharks haven't eaten it. Hey, you're shaking the boat!"

His voice, shrill with anxiety, seemed to come from a great distance. And his body, too, seemed farther away, isolated there at the rear of the boat. Yet the thing could see everything with preternatural clearness.

The swarthy face of the little, thick-built man, cheeks grown strangely pale under their sunburn, eyes wide and wild. Arms and hands tensed, but still holding the gun.

"What the devil you trying to do? This place is alive with sharks. *Sacré du Nom,* say something, and quit staring with those horrible eyes. I—"

He dropped the gun and grabbed wildly at the gunwale. With a snarl, the creature launched at him, and in one swift jerk of irresistible muscles threw him overboard. There was a boiling of movement, as long, dark bodies shaped like cigars darted up from the depths. Blood mingled with the blue waters, and the thing picked up the oars.

It was shaking in every nerve with horrible excitement, a burning sense of satisfaction. But now—there were explanations to think of. Cold with thoughtful speculation, it rowed toward where the island lay slumbering in the warm brilliance of the peaceful morning sun.

IT GOT BACK to the island too soon! The sun hung in midsky over a silent, deserted land. The cook was around somewhere, but no noises came from him. The boats of the men were beyond vision, beyond the blue watery horizon that quivered ever so gently against the background of blue haze of sky.

It was the waiting that was hard. The seconds and minutes of the eternity of the afternoon dragged their deadly course. The thing walked along the shore, tensely; it lay restlessly in the lush green grass under the cool of the palm trees, and in every moment of every hour its mind was fuming with a mad chaos of plans, of wild emotion tides turgid with murder lust, and of a ceaseless, anxious mental reiteration of the explanation it had prepared.

Once, it heard a clatter of dishes from the cook's shack. Its pulses leaped, and its first deadly desire was to rush over and destroy him. But cunning stopped that surging thrust of ferine eagerness. It would go over, instead, and try its story on him—but it dismissed that plan, too, as useless.

At last, the men came, their boats pulling long rows of dead sharks. The creature watched with glowing, remorseless eyes, its body so tortured by fury that for a crazy moment it wanted only to leap down on the boat and smash the men to death with battering blows.

And then Corliss was climbing out of the boat, and the thing heard itself saying something in a choked voice, and Corliss was exclaiming incredulously:

"Attacked you! The flipper thing attacked the boat and killed Perratin!"

Corliss was vaguely aware of the other men hurrying up from the boats muttering questions. The sun, low in the western sky, speared slanting rays into his eyes; and he kept squinting them, as he stood there on the wooden, makeshift dock. Instinctively, his feet planted apart, as if he had to brace his body against a stunning blow. He stared at the lean, dark face of the stranger with its queer eyes, rugged line of powerful jaw and aquiline features; and a curious chill followed an abnormal path up his spinal column, lodging finally like a cake of ice in his brain.

It wasn't the death. He had seen death before, horrible death, and heard of things that had happened to men he knew; mind-shaking things. And always he had felt that some day the laws of chance would write an agonizing conclusion to his own life. More than once he had felt the thrill touch, when it seemed as if that some day had come.

No, it wasn't the death. It was the sense of unreality, of stark disbelief, of slow, sick distrust of this—this Jones, that grew and grew until it was a dry ache within him. His voice, when he forced himself to speak again, sounded harsh and rasping to his own ears:

"Why didn't Perratin shoot the damned beast? A couple of bullets could have—"

"He did shoot!" the creature said hurriedly, adjusting its mind to this new twist. It hadn't thought again of the gun until this moment, but if Corliss wanted Perratin to have fired a gun, then he could have that, too. It went on swiftly: "But we didn't have a chance. The monster just struck the boat so hard that Perratin was knocked out. I tried to pull him in, but I was far too late. The creature pulled Perratin under, and I was so scared that it might come at the boat again that I grabbed the oars and pulled for the island. The cook will tell you I arrived about noon."

FROM behind Corliss, Progue uttered a jarring laugh, a deep, mirthless guffaw that split the late-afternoon air. He said:

"Of all the weak stories I've ever heard, the ones this guy pulls are lousiest. I tell you, Corliss, there's something damn funny when, the first time this here stranger goes out with one of our men, there's a murder. Yeah, I said murder!"

Corliss stared at the big Dutchman, and for a moment it seemed to him his own face must have looked very like Progue's: dark and grim and suspicious. And then—it was odd how Progue, putting into words the very thoughts that were in his own mind, made him realize how mad and preposterous the very idea of such a thing was. Murder! Utterly ridiculous!

"Progue," Corliss snapped, "you've got to learn to control your tongue! The thing is absolutely absurd."

The thing looked at the Dutchman, its body stiff. Strangely, its only emotion was egotistical consciousness of its control of the situation; the feeling was so strong that, for the moment, it was incapable even of anger. It said: "I don't want to quarrel with you, and I realize it looks bad, what happened, but just remember we were going out after what Perratin himself described as a new and dangerous type of shark. And why should I want to murder a perfect stranger. I—"

Its voice trailed off, for Progue had turned away and was staring down at the rowboat it and Perratin had used. The boat was

moored to the end of the dock, and Progue just stood there, looking down at it. Suddenly, he jumped down into the boat, and the thing held its breath as the Dutchman stooped out of its sight beyond the edge of the dock. Its impulse was to run forward and see what the man was doing, but it didn't dare.

Corliss was saying: "That's right, Progue. You're altogether too damn free with your accusations. What possible motives could—"

The creature heard no more. Its brain was a black swirl of chaos as it stared aghast at Progue. The Dutchman had straightened, and in his hands he held Perratin's shining rifle. He had taken something from the gun, a glittery metal thing that shone in his hands; he said softly:

"How many bullets did you say Perratin fired?"

A strange blur of horror swirled through the thing's mind. It knew there must be meaning to such a question, for there was meaning to the hard, expectant expression on the tough, muscular face of the Dutchman. A trap! But what, how? It stammered:

"Why . . two . . three." With a dreadful effort, it caught itself. "I mean two. Yes, two! Then the flipper fish hit the boat, and Perratin dropped the gun and—"

It stopped! It stopped because Progue was smiling, a dangerous, nasty, triumphant, sneering smile. His voice came, a deep, liquid, caressing sound:

"Then how come that not one bullet in the clip of this automatic rifle has been fired? Explain that, Mr. Clever Stranger Jones—" His voice exploded abruptly into a burst of rage: "You damned murderer!"

It was strange the way the comforting world of the island seemed suddenly to fade away into remoteness. To Corliss, the effect was utterly curious and grim, ultimately cold and unpleasant, as if the little group of men seemed abruptly to be, not on the island at all, but on that bare, wooden, unprotected platform in the middle of a vast, unfriendly sea. The sickening sensation was heightened by the way the long, low-built building blotted out the green security of the island. Only the shaking shadows of darkening water remained on all sides; and into his brain pulsed the indescribable melancholy of its ceaseless, insistent lapping against the wooden girders that held up the platform.

It didn't make sense, what Progue had said. The big body of the Dutchman towered before him, and on the man's face was the tigerish smile of certainty, grim and unyielding. For a moment, then, in his mind's eye, Corliss saw the horror of the swarthy little Frenchman, Perratin, being ripped to pieces by an armored monster of the deep. But the rest didn't make sense. He jerked out:

"You're crazy, Progue. Why, in the name of all the gods of this ocean, should Jones kill any of us?"

The thing's whirling mind snatched ravenously at the refuge offered by those words. It asked, in bewilderment:

"A clip! I don't know what you mean!"

The Dutchman's beefy face thrust forward until it was only about a foot from the thing's lean, hard, puzzled face.

"Yaah!" he snarled. "That's exactly what caught you—not knowing what an automatic rifle was. Well, it has a clip in it, a clip of bul-

lets—twenty-five, this one's got, and not one of 'em's been fired."

The full force of the trap into which it had thrust itself closed like steel jaws on the creature's mind. But now the danger was here, uncertainty and confusion fell away from its brain. Caution remained, and a raging chagrin; it spat in an ugly voice:

"I don't know how it happened, but it did. He fired two shots, and if you can't think of how he could have done it, I can't help you. I repeat, what reason could I have for killing anybody here? I—"

"I think I can explain this business." The tall, thin body of Brains Stapley forced itself to the front of the body of men who stood there in grim silence. "Suppose Perratin did fire twice—with the two bullets that remained from his last clip. Before he could more than insert another clip, it was too late. Jones could have been so excited that he didn't even notice what Perratin was doing."

"Jones ain't the excitable type!" Progue grunted, yet there was a grudging acceptance of the explanation in his voice.

"But there's something else not so easily explained?" Stapley went on in a stiff voice. "Considering that a shark can travel up to seventy miles an hour, it isn't possible that they found this creature in approximately the same place as yesterday. In other words, Jones is lying when he says they saw the creature, unless—"

He hesitated, and Corliss broke in: "Unless what?"

Brains still hesitated, but at last he said almost reluctantly: "I'm back on my subject, the shark god!"

He went on hastily, before anybody could speak: "Don't say it's far-fetched. I know it. But we've all been in the South Seas for years, and we've all seen inexplicable things. Our minds have taken curious, irrational twists in that period. I know that, according to the scientific outlook, I've become a superstitious yokel, but I've reached the point where I question that verdict. I think in reality I've become attuned to the mystery that's here. I can see things, feel things, *know* things that have no meaning for the westerner.

"For years now, I've been in lonely places, listening to the tide whisper against a hundred remote shores. I've watched the southern moon, and been saturated with a sense of the timelessness of this world of water; the primeval, incredible timelessness of it.

"We white men have come here in our boisterous way, and we've brought motor-driven ships, and we've built cities on the edge of the water. Unreal cities! They suggest time in the midst of the timeless, and you know that they're not here to stay. Some day, there'll be no white men in this part of the world; there'll only be the islands and the men of the islands, the sea and the things of the sea.

"Here's what I'm getting at: I've sat around native fires and listened to the old, old stories of the shark gods, and of the form of the shark god when he was in the water. It fitted; I tell you, Corliss, it fitted with this creature that Perratin described. At first, it just struck me as curious that there actually could be a shark of that description. And then I began to think about it, and the more I thought about it, the more alarmed I became.

"Because, you see, a shark god can take the form of a man. And there really isn't any other explana-

tion of a man coming to this island, a thousand hopeless miles from the nearest port. Jones is—"

A deep, disgusted voice interrupted him—to Corliss' amazement, Progue's voice, biting, sharp with sarcasm: "Of all the damned crazy, superstitious junk! Brains, you'd better go soak your head. I still don't like this guy's manner; I don't like his eyes; I don't like anything about him. But when the day comes that I swallow that kind of rot—"

"You can both stop talkin'," said the little Englishman, Denton. Corliss saw that the man had moved to the edge of the building, from where the island was partly visible. "If you'll come here, and see what I see, you'll both quit spoutin' rot. There's a native in a canoe, and he's already inside the breakers, coming along the shore toward us. He's proof that Jones could have come in a boat."

THE NATIVE WAS a splendid young man in his prime, brown-skinned, handsome, magnificently muscled. As he came forward from where he had drawn his canoe up onto the shore, rocky at the point, he was grinning with the easy good nature of a friendly man of the islands in the presence of white men. Corliss grinned in return, but when he spoke it was to Progue and to the thing:

"Denton's right—and Jones, believe me, I'm sorry for all the trouble we've been making for you."

The thing acknowledged the apology with a slight nod of its head. But there was no relaxing of its body or mind. It stared at the approaching native with every muscle tensed, conscious of a cold dismay as it remembered that those men of the islands had within them the special sense.

Almost sick with anxiety, it half turned away, as the native stopped a few feet from Corliss. Partly concealed by the little group of men, it knelt and fumbled with the shoelace of one shoe. It heard Corliss say in one of the island dialects:

"And what brings you here, friend?"

The young man answered in the low, musical voice of his people: "A storm comes, white man, and I was far out to sea. The storm approaches from the direction of my own land, so I have come seeking refuge where it is to be found. I—"

His voice trailed off curiously, and Corliss saw that the native was staring with widening eyes at Jones. "Hello," the leader said, "do you know him?"

The thing rose to its feet, like a tiger at bay; there was a swift, ruthless, unconquerable ferocity in the chill gaze with which it bored into the brown man's eyes. The incredible fury hate in that icy fish brain bridged the gap between the native and the creature. The man opened his mouth, tried to speak, licked dry lips, and then turned blindly and started to run back toward his boat.

"What the devil!" Corliss ejaculated. "Hey, come back here."

The native did not even look around. At top speed, he reached his boat. All in one movement, he jerked it into the water and leaped into it. And in the gathering gloom of falling night began to paddle with a furious disregard of danger along the devious path of deep water that wound in and out among the rocks that made the lagoon at this point a trap for the unwary.

Corliss snapped: "Progue, take the rest of the men and get those dead sharks into the warehouse!" He raised his voice in a shrill shout: "Hey, you fool! You can't go out in that storm. We'll protect you!"

The native must have heard. But in the darkness it was impossible to see whether he so much as looked back. Corliss whirled on the thing, his face hard with suspicion.

"That was rather obvious," he said coldly. "The man knew you. That means you're from his island or from around there. He's afraid of you, so extraordinarily afraid that he immediately thought that he had fallen in with your gang. Prague was quite right. You're a tough customer. Well, let me warn you! We're the toughest outfit you've ever run across. You'll never be alone with one of us again, though I must admit that I still don't believe you killed Perratin. It doesn't make sense. As soon as this storm is over, we'll take you to the islands and find out what all this is about."

Abruptly, he walked away. But the thing was scarcely aware, except that he was gone. It was thinking flamingly: "The man of the islands will be driven back this way by the storm. He will remember what Corliss said about protecting him, and will remember that white men, too, are strong. In his terror, he will expose me. There is only one thing to do!"

It was darker now, and the native was barely visible in the dusk that was pressing down upon the island and the water. The thing walked swiftly to where a gill of turgid water cascaded down into the lagoon. The lagoon was deep here, sinking straight from the rock shore. The thing was so intent on the shark that swirled up in a rush of boiling water that the swirl and the noise of the tiny waterfall drowned out the approach of Corliss. Suddenly, with a gasp, it twisted on its heel; and there was Corliss, a few feet away, staring down at the black waters.

Corliss couldn't have explained the impulse that had made him turn and follow the thing. It was partly interest in watching the native, and then the movement in the water where Jones had gone, and the way Jones was bending toward the water.

A needle of horror pierced him now as he saw, by the light of day that remained, a long, dark, vicious shape, a torpedolike body that plunged into the shadows below and vanished. Abruptly, he glanced up at the thing, conscious of deadly danger.

THE THING stood very still for a moment, glaring back at him. They were alone there, at the edge of the sea; and its every muscle grew taut and electric with the murder determination to drag this big, grim man into the water. It half crouched, to make one overpowering spring, when it caught the glint of metal in Corliss' hand, and its unholy desire evaporated like mist in sunlight before that weapon of death.

Corliss was saying: "By Heaven, that was a shark, and you were talking to it! I must be going crazy—"

"You are crazy!" the thing gasped. "I saw the shark and I drove it away. If the storm's over by morning, I want to take a swim here, and I don't want any sharks around. Get those ideas out of your head. I—"

It was interrupted by a shriek for help, a horrible, high-pitched sound that quivered on the dim, twilight air like a very devil's scream of agonized fear. It came from out over the water, where the native was a dim shape against the background of black water and dark, moonless sky. It was a sound that made Corliss' blood run cold.

The world of lowering darkness pressed down upon Corliss like an enveloping blanket, weighted yet

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With a wild cry of rage, the thing hurled down the rocks to the sea, tearing off its clothes to plunge into the froth.

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without warmth. There, a few feet away, was—Jones—a lean, hard-built man with cold, inhuman eyes that glowed vaguely in the quarter light of approaching night. The sense that this ruthless-looking stranger might attack him was so strong that Corliss gripped his revolver with tight fingers, and for a moment dared no more than send one glance out toward the southwest, where the native was a blur on the black water.

Instinctively, he backed away from the water's edge, and from the stranger—and looked again out over that ebony sea. The native seemed to be fighting something that was attacking him from the water, striking at it with his oar, up and down, up and down, desperately, hopelessly. Three times, while Corliss looked, the man grasped at the gunwale of his canoe and simply hung on, trying to keep his tiny craft from turning over. With a rush, Corliss turned his gaze back to the thing, motioned menacingly with his weapon.

"Get going—ahead of me!" He raised his voice, a deep-bellowed command for the men on the wharf: "Hey, Progue, quick! Get the launch ready, start the engine! We've got to go after that native—and a couple of you come out here, give me a hand!"

Two men approached after a moment, and Corliss recognized Denton and a man called Tareyton, a blunt-nosed, blunt-minded American. Corliss snapped:

"Take this guy to the bunkhouse and keep him under guard till I get back. Denton, here's my gun!"

He thrust the weapon into the tough little Englishman's fingers, and the last thing he heard, as he sped off at a run, was Denton's harsh voice snarling: "Get a move on, you!"

THE BOAT ENGINE was throbbing as Corliss leaped aboard, and, under Progue's guiding fingers, moved away from the wharf immediately. Gasping, Corliss flung himself down beside Progue, who was at the steering wheel. The big Dutchman turned a dark, humorless face toward him.

"We're fools to risk those rocks in this darkness!"

Corliss ground out: "We've got to save that native from whatever is attacking him—to find out why he was so desperately afraid of Jones. I tell you, Progue, it's the most important thing in our lives right now."

It wasn't exactly dark. The beam of the motor launch's searchlight blazed a path along the black waters. Corliss watched tensely as the launch began at dead-slow pace to wind in and out along the rock-lined valley of deep water that was the only outlet to the larger, deeper part of the lagoon, where it was too dark now to see the native—too dark because of the black, ugly clouds that swam up out of the horizon and billowed monstrously over the night sky.

Abruptly, a sickening jar! The boat reeled, and Corliss was flung stunningly for several feet. Dizzily, he clawed for a hold, grabbed a brace pole of the steering gear, and pulled himself back. The boat was still tilting sharply, the motor screaming with speed, and then, somehow, they were going on again.

Corliss gasped: "We struck a rock!"

He waited for the rush of water that would drag them into the black depths. Progue's voice came to him, deep-toned, puzzled, alarmed. "It wasn't a rock. We've been out of

the shallows for more than a minute. We're in deep water. I thought for a second we might have run into that native's canoe, but I would have seen it first!"

Corliss relaxed—and was flung with a jar that jerked him painfully against the gunwale. He clutched frantically, dizzily for support; and then his blurring vision saw that the launch was keeling over at a dismaying angle. With a shout, he clawed in the other direction, throwing his weight desperately to re-establish the balance. Alone, he couldn't have done it. He realized that and thanked his gods for the insight that had made him select hard-bitten, quick-witted men for his sharking crews—men who, like himself, had faced deadly danger in all its forms and needed no leader to tell them what to do in an emergency. As one man, they, too, flung their weight into that desperate balance.

And once again the boat righted itself and plowed on.

"Slow down!" Corliss yelled hoarsely. "And turn that searchlight into the water. We've got to see where we are."

Somebody manipulated the searchlight mechanism; the beam flashed down into the waters of the lagoon. For a moment, it sparkled and reflected so brilliantly that Corliss was dazzled. And then—

Then he flinched. Never in all his born days would he forget the horror, the spine-chilling terror of the nightmare shapes that turned and twisted, wriggled and churned in the nocturnal gloom below.

In that lurid spray of light, the water showed alive with sharks. Massive, twisting, writhing bodies, glittering triangular fins. Hundreds of long, vicious, torpedo shapes. *Thousands!*

Even as he stared with distended eyes, he realized that somewhere out there was the torn and tattered body of the native. Corliss felt the launch reel like a sick and living thing as it struck a wall of the giant fish. He saw the towering Dutchman twist the wheel like a flash, and dizzily the boat turned and righted itself.

"Back!" Corliss thundered. "Back for our lives! Head for the beach! Beach the boat on the sand! They're trying to turn us over!"

The water swirled and boiled; the motor snarled with power; the boat shuddered and squealed in every thin, hard plank, and overhead the reaching blackness of clouds swelled malignantly over the farthest sky. The first blast of wind, like a blow from a sledge hammer, spewed water at them as they frantically dragged the boat onto the upper heights of the sandy beach. Corliss shouted:

"We've got to hurry, hurry! Grab the loose stuff and head for the bunkhouse at top speed. We left Denton and Tareyton alone with the devil himself. They haven't a chance because they don't know what they're up against."

A solid sheet of rain struck his face and body, and nearly knocked him to the ground before he could turn his back to it. The rain and the wind lashed their backs with whiplike savagery as they ran, a long, thin line of men, desperately striving to escape that hell of raging storm.

THE HOWLING of the wind outside came to the thing as it sat with stiffened muscles and taut nerves in the bunkhouse. To its straining, infuriated senses, bent only on escape, the dim world of wooden bunks was an unreal, fantastic place. Weird yellow shadows flickered on the walls as the yellow light from the lamps that hung down from the ceiling

waxed and waned in the raging drafts that squeezed through the cracks in the walls of the poorly constructed building.

And then the rain came, a battering roar of it that threatened to smash the very roof above them. But the roof, at least, was snugly built, and no leaks started. The seeking, frenzied mind of the creature flashed from the thought of the storm to the men who were out in that hideous tempest—who must be coming toward the cabin by now—if they had escaped. It felt no real hope that they had not escaped the peril of the water monsters.

That thought, too, was smashed aside; and, once again, the whole abnormal power of the thing's mind concentrated on the two men who stood between it and safety, two men who must die within two minutes, if the escape was to be made before Corliss and the others returned.

Two minutes! The monster turned its chill gaze on the two men, appraising for the hundredth time in less than half an hour the situation they created.

The man Denton sat on the edge of his bunk, small, chunkily built, inordinately nervous, shifting his feet, twisting his body, his fingers manipulating with ceaseless energy the glinting revolver he held. He caught the measured gaze of the thing and stiffened; the words that barked from his lips only confirmed the creature in its opinion of the grim capabilities of this little Englishman.

"Yeah!" the man snapped. "There's a look in your eyes that says you want to start something. Well, don't! I've been around these seas for twenty years, and believe me I've handled tough customers in my time. I don't have to be told you've got the strength to tear me apart—I saw you handle Progue this morning and I know what you can do—but just remember this little piece of steel cuts you right down to my size."

He waved the revolver with an easy confidence, and the thing thought tensely: "If I changed to my true shape, I could kill him in spite of the gun, but I couldn't change back again and couldn't get out of this cabin. I'd be trapped!"

It grew aware that the American was speaking. "What Denton said goes double for me, see! There ain't nuthin' I ain't done in my time, an' to my way of thinkin' Perratin was a damn good fellow, and I don't like the way he died. I'm just achin' for you to start somethin' so Denton here—an' me—can watch the lead tearin' into your brain. You know, Denton"—he half turned, his brown eyes gleaming, his flattened nose dilating—"why not just make a target outa him, and tell Corliss he tried to escape?"

"Naw!" Denton shook his head. "Corliss ought to be here any minute with the gang. Besides, I don't go for straight murder."

"Bah!" Tareyton grunted ferociously. " 'Tain't murder to kill a murderer!"

The thing watched Denton uneasily. He had the revolver, and nothing else mattered. It said, with a horrible effort at casualness:

"You men must be fools, or cowards. Here we are, all of us, on an island. There's no way for any of us to get off. If I leave this cabin, I go out into the naked storm—and I'd spend a miserable, rotten night, and in the morning you'd find me, anyway. What're you going to do—sit up and watch me all night?"

"By golly!" snapped Tareyton. "There's an idea. Let's turn him

out, lock the door from the inside, and we'll all get some sleep."

THE THING'S brain leaped high with hope, then sank leadenly as Denton shook his head. "Naw, I wouldn't do that to a mad dog. But what he said gave me an idea." His voice became mocking: "Tareyton, show the gentleman what we're gonna do with him. Take the rope from that nail behind you and tie him up. I'll watch the whole business with this little gun, so there'll be no funny business. Mind that, you, or I'll let you have it."

The thing rasped: "What a fool I'd be to attack Tareyton and have you put a bullet in my back—"

But with horrendous eagerness, it thought: The American would block the gun for one fraction of a second. Even if he didn't, it wouldn't matter. He'd be close, the first time either of them had come close, and that was all that was needed. Neither had the faintest inkling of the strength they faced and—

Now!

With tigerish speed, it leaped at Tareyton. It had a flashing vision of his distorted eyes, mouth gaping to cry out, and then it had ripped him from the floor and flung him, all in one lightning movement, straight at Denton.

The hoarse, startled bellow of Denton mingled with the dismayed, baritone cry of Tareyton in one blended scream of agony, as they smashed together sickeningly and crashed in a contorted heap against the nearest wall.

The thing ached to leap upon them and tear them to bits, but there was no time even to see if they were dead. Already the two minutes of grace were ages past. It was too late—too late for anything but instant flight.

It snatched open the door and bumped with headlong, body-jarring force into Corliss. It was flung back off its balance. And in that moment of dismay it saw the towering Progue beyond the leader. And there were other men crowding forward.

THE MOMENT seemed an eternity there in that night of mad storm. The yellow-orange light from inside the bunkhouse did crazy, ghastly things to the faces of the startled men who crouched low against the nightmare blasts of tempest; a jagged spur of lightning showed them the lean, dark, wolfish face of the thing as it struggled to right itself.

Surprise was equal, but the infinitely harder, steelier muscles recovered first. The thing struck at Corliss, one smashing, hate-driven blow that caught him glancingly and sent him staggering back against Progue—and then it was darting out into the night, out into the fury of unrelenting wind and rain.

One assault it made against the wild strength of the storm, head bent, body straining against that ferocious pressure, and then, in a flare of caution, as it realized its slow progress made it an easy target for rifles fired from the bunkhouse, it ceased bucking the wind and, instead, ran with it toward where the waters glinted black in the near east—black and boiling with unholy frenzy of wind-lashed waves.

As it ran, it began to tear off its clothes—shirt, trousers, shoes, stockings—and the men saw it for an instant silhouetted against a spasm of sheet lightning, tall and gleaming naked against the briefly brilliant sky.

They saw it once more after that, a shining, unconquerable shape, as it poised on the rocky brink of the Stygian sea. And then it was gone —a white flash diving into the pounding black waters beyond. Corliss found his voice.

"We've got him!" he bellowed above the shriek of the tempest. "We've got the damn thing where it can't get away."

Before he could speak further, he was swept into the bunkhouse by the tide of men that poured through the open doorway. The door was shut, and it was Progue who breathlessly snapped:

"What the devil do you mean—got him? The damn fool committed suicide. You bet your life it can't get away after that."

Corliss pulled himself together, but when he started to explain, a literal gush of words flooded from him. "I tell you," he finished, "that's proof! Brains was right. That damned thing out there is the shark god in human form—and I tell you we've got him—if we hurry!"

His voice took on a machine-gun quality: "Don't you see? There's no outlet to the sea where he jumped into the lagoon, except through the channel we use for our boats. At one point, that channel hugs the shore, and that's where we've got to stop him from getting to the safety of the open sea. Brains!"

"Yes, sir!" The tall, thin, intellectual-looking Englishman jumped forward briskly.

"Take a half dozen men, get a parcel of dynamite caps from the ammunition shack, take a searchlight, and station yourself on the shore beside the channel. Set off the dynamite at intervals *under* water—no fish or any living thing can stand the blast of sound made by an underwater explosion. Use the searchlight to probe the waters. It's narrow there. You can't and mustn't miss! Hurry!"

After the men were gone, Progue said: "You've forgotten one thing, boss. There *is* an outlet to the sea where that damned thing jumped into the lagoon. Remember the bottleneck of water between two towering stretches of rock. A shark could just slip out there."

Corliss shook his head grimly. "I didn't forget, and you're right—as far as you go. A shark could get out there. But this thing in its natural form has great, powerful flippers. And those flippers are too big for it to go through the narrow hell of water; they'd be torn off, cut to rib-

IF YOU WANT THE LADIES TO LIKE YOU

—HOME AGAIN SWEETS—AND HOW KISSABLE YOU LOOK!
—YOU, TOO, DEAR—IT WAS NICE OF YOU TO SHAVE AGAIN BEFORE COMING HOME—
—DON'T BE SILLY! I DIDN'T—I USED THAT SAMPLE OF LISTERINE SHAVING CREAM YOU SENT FOR—IT'S A WONDER!
—IT WOULD BE —LISTERINE PRODUCTS ARE SO WORTH WHILE!
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bons. Don't you see what that means? The thing has to retain its human form if it wants to go through that neck of deep water to the open sea; and in its human shape, it must be horribly vulnerable, or it wouldn't have been so cautious with us. It—"

A dull *boom* out of the night cut his voice off abruptly. A slow, hard smile of satisfaction twisted his heavy, powerful face.

"There went the first explosion. That may mean the damned thing tried to get through the regular channel. Well, it knows better now. We've got it cornered. Either it takes the risks of swimming that hell's gantlet in human form, or we kill it tomorrow morning, whatever its shape. And now, quick, everybody take torches and rifles and line the shore. It mustn't get ashore!

THE SEA WAS too strong, the waves too high, the night too dark! A sense of disaster, cold and deadly, throbbed along the thing's icy fish nerves as it struggled to keep its human body where its thin, helpless knob of human head could breathe air. It fought with bitter, ceaseless strength, but the sea thundered and roared, bellowed and churned.

The nightmare sea was a pressing wall of darkness on every side except one. And that one straight ahead, where the water glittered white—even in this darkness the white fury of the breakers was visible. In that white sea of foam-flecked death showed a single dark ribbon—the one way that was open to the safe, vast ocean beyond; a narrow ribbon of blackness, where the water was deep and twisting and incredibly fast.

And through that storm-frenzied channel, a shark was now pressing outward from the lagoon toward the ocean, showing the way.

The thing struggled to hold itself erect in the water, paddled furiously with its legs, slashed at the boiling, raging water with its arms—and strained its vision to the utmost limit, striving to follow the faint gleam of the flashing dark, triangular fin of the pilot shark as the shark made the test run of that demon channel.

The shark was struggling now, maneuvering frantically as it fought the roaring ferocity of the water that poured and belched through the writhing bottleneck to safety. The fin vanished, and then it was there again, vaguely visible against the gray-white waves.

It was through, safe, a dingy blur of fin that vanished instantly into the blackness of the thunderous ocean beyond.

The thing hesitated. It was its turn now, but there was no eagerness within it to storm those jagged, shaking waters in this frail human body that it wore.

It snarled in frustrated rage, a high, shrill, inhuman cry of unutterable hate—and half turned back to the shore, impelled by a wild, surging desperation to smash its way through the soft-bodied cordon of men, regardless of the danger they represented.

And then it snarled again and spat its ferocity as it saw the line of flaming torches that dotted the shore. Each torch cast a pale, flickering shadow of light even in that hell of rain and tempest, and beside each torch a man paced restlessly, carrying a rifle in alert, nervous fingers.

That way was blocked. The thing realized it even as the mad thoughts of rushing the shore stabbed through its brain. Only too well, now, it saw the trap that held it. This small section of the lagoon was blocked off as completely as if nature had

waited through a million million years for this moment, to trap this deadly monster of the deep.

Escape was blocked, except—straight ahead!

Once again, the thing turned its cold, glittering fish eyes toward that deadly outlet. Steely teeth clicked in horrible defiance, lips tightened into a thin, sharkish line—and then it launched itself into those raging waters.

There was a sense of incredible velocity; instinctively it struggled to make a twist that sight of the shark's test run had seared into its mind. Water smashed down into its mouth; it spat, coughed, fought, and then it had a brief vision of dreadful doom—a wall of rock reared up straight ahead, yards high, black, grim, merciless rock. Frantically, it twisted and plunged aside with maddened, reaching arms. But no muscles could fight that irresistible sea.

One glimpse of its doom, one fearless snarl of astounded, unbelieving ferocity, and then a stab of pain unutterable as its human head crushed into a pulp against steel-hard rock. Bones broke, muscles tore, flesh mashed—a tormented body was flung out into the midnight ocean.

The pilot shark smelled the fresh meat and came circling back. In a moment, it was joined by a dozen other dark, struggling shapes.

The storm pounded all through that black night. It was a cold, wet dawn that broke finally over a cold, wet, weary group of men. As Corliss headed the first boat out into the quietened waters of the lagoon, toward that narrow, still-roaring funnel of death, his face was dark with the fatigue of the long vigil, but grim with determination.

"If the thing took the chance," he said, "we'll never find anything. But we'll know. There's an undercurrent where the channel twists that only a big fish could fight. Nothing else could prevent itself being smashed."

"Hey," yelled Denton in alarm, his face still white from the pain he had endured, "don't go too near that place. Tareyton and I have had enough smashing for one day."

It was noon before Corliss was convinced that no dangerous living thing remained in the lagoon. As they headed toward the shore, tired but relieved, the southern sun was sparkling down on an emerald isle that glittered and shone in its vast setting of sapphire ocean.

DOUBLED IN BRASS

by LESTER DEL REY

When an elf makes radiator ornaments —results are apt to be disturbing!

Illustrated by Kramer

ELLOWAN COPPERSMITH stopped outside the building and inspected the sign with more than faint pleasure. It was a new one, gleaming copper letters on a black background catching the first rays of the sun, and

showing up clearly against the newly painted walls. It read:

DONAHUE & COPPERSMITH
Blacksmithing—Auto Repairs
All Work in Copper:
RADIATORS A SPECIALTY

To be sure, it was not his idea to join Michael Donahue in partnership, but the smith had insisted when the shop was remodeled, and the elf's protests had not been too loud. Now that the sign was up, he found the sight of it a pleasant one. But there was work to be done, as usual, and Ellowan was not one to waste his time. He unlocked the shop and went back to his workroom, the little bells on his shoes tinkling in time to his whistling.

"Eh, now," he chuckled at the sight of the radiators waiting his work. "It's a fortune we'll be making yet, and never the need of hunting my work. I'll be wanting no more than to stay here."

The elf picked up the first radiator and placed it in the clamps on his worktable, arranged his charcoal brazier and cunning little tools, and raised his three-foot body up onto the stool. Things had indeed changed since the day when he awoke in the hills where his people had retired in sleep to escape the poisonous fumes of coal. He had found that there was little use for his skill in copper and brass; the people no longer used copper utensils, and it had gone hard with him until he drifted into this town and found the smithy.

Michael Donahue had given him a copper radiator to mend, and the excellence of his work had suggested a permanent job working on the brass and copper parts of the autos and making little ornaments for radiator caps. And though the fumes of the autos were as bad as the coal smoke which had poisoned his people, he had found pleasure in the thought that some day all the coal and gas must be used up, and his people could once more come out into the world.

As his skill had become known, more work was found. Donahue bought old radiators, Ellowan mended them to better than their original, and they resold them for an excellent profit. Now the shop had been repaired, and the elf had a workroom to himself. His old clothes had given place to a modern style of dress, except for the little turned-up sandals with their copper bells; modern shoes hurt his feet. And the people of the town had become used to him, and accepted him as merely a pleasant little midget who did unusually fine work.

Under his hands, the twisted shell of the radiator which had been smashed in an accident became whole again. His little tools straightened the fins and the marvelous flux and solder he used made the tubes watertight once more, until it was gleaming and perfect. He set it aside, and the bright glow of the brazier sank instantly into blackness as its use was done. The clock, whose hands pointed at seven, indicated it was breakfast time, and his cereal and milk would be waiting in the little lunchroom down the street.

ELLOWAN was coming from his own workroom to the smithy when he saw the battered little car drive up. A red-headed young man one size too large for the car climbed out. His face was pleasant and open and he wore a wide smile, but still managed to convey the impression that whatever he had to do left him highly uncomfortable.

"Is Mr. Donahue here?" he asked of the elf.

"That Mr. Donahue is not. He'll

not be coming in until the hour of eight." Ellowan studied the other, and decided he liked what he saw. "And you should be the one to know that, too, Patrick."

"So you recognize me? I suppose you're Ellowan Coppersmith that my father wrote me about?"

"Aye, I'm Ellowan. Eh, now, it's thinking I was that you'd be at the college studying to be the great engineer."

"Uh-huh." The grin was distinctly sheepish now. "I couldn't stand the math. As an engineer, I'm a fine machinist, and that's all; so they told me I could come home. Now I'll have to face the music and tell dad what happened to his plans."

"Eh, so? Now that's a shame, indeed, but not one that a good breakfast won't make better." Ellowan locked the shop carefully and started down the street, his short, stubby hand plucking at the boy. "A man takes things best at his work, and your father isn't the one to spoil a good rule. It's hungry you must be after the night of driving, and a pretty waitress to serve the food will do you no harm."

Patrick fell in behind. His face was incapable of looking anything but good-natured, nor could his worry ruin his appetite. But the waitress failed to draw more than a casual glance from him. The elf watched him carefully for signs of the normal male curiosity, then searched through his memory of Donahue's conversations for some clue.

His brown eyes twinkled as he found it, and his rough bronzed skin crinkled up until his beard threatened to stand out straight before him. "Now I'm minded that young men have a habit of not coming home when there's trouble they're in," he said calmly. "And it's not the like of what you'd do except for good reason, when there's work to be found at all. Now who might the girl be, Patrick?"

"People call me Pat, Ellowan." He took three times too long in eating the food on his fork, then answered indirectly. "I heard that Mary Kroning was seeing quite a lot of young Wilson. I don't like him, and —well, I do like her. Know them?"

"Eh, that I do. A sweet lass, and a pretty one. It's a shame, to be sure, that her father can work no more from the stroke that he had. And Hubert Wilson has the money, though I'm not saying he's the man for the girl. It's nothing but trouble we've had since his car came to the shop for our work."

Pat nodded heavy agreement. "Wilson's a swine, and looks like one."

"That may be. But I'd not be telling the girl of that," the elf advised. He counted out the price of the breakfast and carefully left the proper tip for the waitress. It had taken time, but he had finally learned that money was much cheaper than that he had used a hundred and twenty years before. Then they headed back to the shop, and the elf returned to his workbench.

But this time he did not glance at the radiators, nor did the little brazier glow brightly as he sat down. Ellowan liked the smith for his broad common sense and good-humored fellowship, and he owed him gratitude for the work and the partnership. From what he had seen, he liked the boy as well—certainly better than the greasy superiority of Hubert Wilson.

Eh, well, there was only one answer: Pat must win Mary, and to keep her, he must secure work from

which he was sure of a good living. The elf chuckled suddenly, and dropped down to go over to his bag that still hung on the wall of the smithy. From within it, he produced an ingot of brass that had retained its luster through the years of his sleep, and sped back into his workshop.

There were new tools there, in addition to the old ones he had carried, tools that he polished and cared for as if they were living things. Now he switched on the motor and inserted the brass bar into a small lathe, working it deftly into the rough shape he desired. Always, to him the turning lathe partook of magic, though he understood the mechanical principles well enough. But that men should make metal serve them so easily was in itself magic, and good magic that he did not hesitate to use.

Satisfied with the rough form, he climbed back on the stool and began cutting and scraping with his instruments, breaking the bar apart in the middle to make two identical pieces. Donahue came into the smithy as he worked, and he could hear the mutter of voices after the first surprised exclamation. His sharp ears made out most of their speech, but it was the same in nature as what Pat had told him, and he went on with his work, paying them little attention. The metal was shaping up beautifully.

Again he put them on the lathe, shaping up the base of the figurines and cutting threads on them. Completed, they were little statues, a few inches high, molded above a conventional radiator cap. But they were unusual in lacking the conventional streamlined greyhound or bird; instead they carried small replicas of Ellowan himself, as he had looked in the old jerkin and tights when he first came to town, and the eyes seemed to twinkle back at him. He chuckled.

"It's neat copies you are, if I do say it myself, and it's good material you have in you. I'm thinking there were never yet better ornaments—nor more useful," he told them. "Almost I'm sorry to silver the one of you."

Donahue and Pat came into the room as he finished the silvering. "The boy's staying with us for the time," Donahue informed the elf. "But I'll not be moving you; he's taking the guest room until he finds a job. When might you be done with the Wilson car?"

Ellowan was unscrewing the old cap, and putting the silvered copy of himself in its place. "Finished it is now, all new wires. And a free cap I'll give him for the money it costs." He looked at the ornament in place and nodded, well pleased. Surely Hubert Wilson would like it. It was novel and shiny enough to please his love of display.

Pat examined the copper one thoughtfully. "You're an artist, Ellowan. But I prefer this to the other; the color suits you better, and I think the face is more cheerful. Who's this for?"

"Who but yourself, lad? There's never a bright spot on the car that you drive, and this will serve, I'm thinking."

"And more than he deserves," Donahue said. "Now be off, you young fool, and don't bother honest men at their labors. There's food in the icebox, and your credit will be good at the store. Since it's loafing you'll be, loaf at home." When Pat had gone, he winked at Ellowan and grinned.

"Now there's a boy for you, Cop-

persmith. And it's glad I am that he'll be wasting no more time at the school. "*Foosh!* 'Twas time and money wasted, that it was.". The ways of a father and son change little with the passing of time.

Ellowan nodded silently and went back to his work, while Donahue stepped into the smithy and began hammering out iron on the anvil. If a man had work there was little more he needed, save a wife for the young and a son for the old.

THE MOON was full, and the air was cool and sweet. Ellowan sat on the back porch with Donahue, each smoking thoughtfully and saying little. Out in the garden there was a sudden rustling sound, then a faint *plop plop* on the grass before them. The smith looked down.

"More rabbits," he said. "Now where would they all be coming from, this near to the town? *Shoo!* Go along with you! I'd have no rabbits eating my vegetables."

The rabbits looked up at him, and one of them thumped a hind leg nervously on the ground, but they refused to move. Ellowan caught Donahue's arm as he started to rise. "They'll not harm the garden." He made a little clucking sound in his throat and the rabbits drew closer. "It's to see me they've come, and there's not a leaf on the place they'll touch, except such weeds as they like."

"Friends of yours?"

"Now that they are, as you should know. Haven't the Little People and rabbits been friends since they hid together in the same burrows from the giants? But I'll send them away and let you say the words you'd be thinking." Again he made the clucking sounds, and the rabbits kicked out a little thudding chorus on the grass, then turned and hopped peacefully away—all except one that went out into the yard to examine some weeds that looked edible.

Donahue watched it for a few minutes, then turned back to the elf. "I'm sorry for the boy. His heart's set on the girl, but it's only right that she'd be thinking of her father needing care and the mother with hardly enough to live on. And money comes hard to a young man here. Never a chance does he have."

"Eh, so; but there's many a girl who thinks of money, but doesn't choose it. I'd not be worrying about the boy." The elf picked up a package at his feet and brought out three small articles that looked like dust filters to be worn over the nose. "What might ozone be?"

"Eh? Oh, ozone. Have you smelled the air close to the big electric motor? Well, that'll be the stuff. Why, now?"

"I bought these at the drugstore, and the clerk was telling me they settled the dust, cleaned the air, and gave off ozone. See, there's a battery that's to be worn on the waist, and a wire to run to the thing. Do you think it might make bad air good?"

"It might that. But precious little ozone you'll get from those batteries, though some there might be. I've seen the like of it used for hay fever."

"Aye. That he told me. And that there were big machines to make more of it for an office. I was for trying it on, and he let me. 'Tis a wonderful invention, I'm thinking."

"Maybe." The smith rose, stretching his big frame. "Though there's more interest in bed, to be sure, that I have. A good night to you." He turned into the house.

Ellowan whistled softly, and two

rabbits stuck their heads out of the bushes and came closer.

"Now, maybe you'd like a ride?" he asked them, and listened to the thudding of their feet. "So? Then come along." He headed for a shed, their little bodies following quietly. For a second he disappeared, while they waited patiently, to come out with a small-framed bicycle. Since the time when a boy had carried him into the town on a wheel, the elf had been fascinated with such an easy way of traveling, and his first money had gone into the purchase of this one, built specially to fit him, and equipped with a three-speed device.

He put his bundle into the basket and picked up the rabbits. They were familiar with such rides and made no protest as he put them beside the bundle. He chuckled. "Now, it's a longer ride you'll get this night. I've five hours before the boy'll be coming home, or he's not what I'm thinking, and there's more than a little road to be covered in that time."

They flattened out, little noses quivering with excitement, and he mounted quickly. There were strong muscles in his corded short legs, and the speed that he made would have surprised the boys who saw him riding only around the town. The road slipped by him smoothly and silently, his faint whistling broken only by a few muttered words. "And they'll be filling the air with poison when there's the like of this to be ridden. Eh, well."

ELLOWAN'S guess as to the time of PĀT'S return was a shrewd one. The little elf had barely put his bicycle away, and turned the rabbits loose, when the battered car came chugging along. He settled back on a seat and watched the auto, paying no attention to the rabbits that scampered back and forth across the driveway.

Nor did Pat; his thoughts were not on the driving, and his eyes were only focused enough to enable him to reach the garage. Sure of the elf's protection, the rabbits gave no more thought to the car than the man did to them.

Since no one else bothered, the car seemed to take matters into its own hands. A rabbit sat placidly chewing a leaf until the wheels were within a few feet of it. The little car jerked, bucked sideways, and left the driveway for the lawn, only to run toward another squatting there. Again it bucked, seemed to consider, and found no opening. The motor roared, and it darted forward, straight toward the animal. Then the wheels left the ground abruptly, front first, followed by the rear, and the auto headed for the garage, leaving the rabbit eating steadily where he had first been.

Ellowan chuckled as Pat came out of the garage, swearing under his breath. "'Tis a pleasant car you have, methinks," the elf observed.

"Must have hit a rock somewhere. I thought sure I'd hit one of those silly animals, but it seems I didn't." Pat pulled at one ear and stared back at the garage. "I've had trouble with the car all evening. First it backfired; almost seemed to pick the times when Mary and I started to quarrel. Then it stopped out in the country, and I couldn't start it for an hour."

"Now it's little trouble I'd call that. Was she minding the stop?"

"Well," the boy admitted, "she didn't seem to. But it's no go, Ellowan. She even told me she wished I'd never come back."

"Eh, so? Now, there are many reasons she could have for that, indeed.

When a girl likes a boy, and there's money she needs that he'll not be having, perchance she'd welcome him less because of the liking she has." The elf smiled at some joke of his own.

Pat nodded slowly. "Maybe you're right, at that. But money doesn't grow on trees."

"It depends on the man who owns the tree. There's a wonderful demand for ornaments of brass, wrought by true craftsmen. I'd a letter from a man who'd been seeing some of the work I do, and it was wanting me to make more for his trade, and at good prices, too. Now, if you were to start a small factory for the making of hinges and doorknobs, ash trays, and fruit bowls, there'd be money for you."

"Uh-huh. I thought of that when I saw your radiator cap. But it takes money to start, and workmen in brass are rare. I'd need money, some machinery, a building, and men—even if you know of a market. That's a tall order."

"Mayhap. Don't be worrying your head with it, lad. The sleep's more needed than the money. And I'll be getting a bit myself." Ellowan nodded good night as they passed inside and turned to his own room, still chuckling over the action of the car. Eh, now, that was good brass in the ornament, and unusual, too.

It was another night, and the elf had finished supper and gone to his own room. From a bureau drawer he drew out a handful of thin sticks and tossed them on the floor, studying them thoughtfully until they made sense to him. "Now, they're not the equal in predictions to the future itself, but they seem sure enough," he muttered. "And the boy's been telling me his Mary was seeing the Wilson pup this night. I'm thinking a ride might do me no harm."

He pocketed the runes, hoping their information might be accurate, as it sometimes was, and went out to his bicycle, tossing a small bag in the basket. Rabbits hopped around, thumping out their desire to go with him, but he shooed them off, and set out alone. He slipped out of the town in short order, and out through the pleasant moonlit country around, until he came to a little winding lane that led back through a wooded section. There was a tiny clearing a way farther on, and tire marks on the dirt indicated that it was not unknown to the boys of the town.

Ellowan turned back into the woods, some distance below the clearing and concealed his wheel. From the bag he pulled out a large cloth and tied it about his face, over his nose. Then he whistled shrilly, and sat down to wait until the rabbits could respond, studying the runes again. Satisfied with them, he looked up at the circle of gray bodies and bright eyes around him. Little muttered words came to his lips, while the noses of the rabbits twitched excitedly.

They started off obediently, if somewhat reluctantly, each going in a direction slightly different from the others. There was another wait before two returned. Then he whistled the others to cease and followed the first rabbit, the second hopping along behind. They passed through most of the woods before they reached their objective.

A small animal with a bushy tail was sedately looking under a log for insects, and the stripes along its back identified it clearly. Ellowan muttered unhappily, and the rabbits re-

fused to go farther. The elf sidled in cautiously, careful not to make a hostile move, and began dropping the food from the bag to the ground, making a trail back toward the clearing. Watching him carefully, the skunk moved over and investigated the line of food, moving along slowly, in no haste to go anywhere.

The second rabbit led off a short distance to another skunk, and the process was repeated, until both trails joined and were connected to the clearing. There the elf scattered the remainder of the bag's contents and moved hurriedly away, seeking a position upwind from the spot, but well within range of his sharp eyes and ears.

He felt nauseated, and cursed his own dumbness for being unable to plan a better scheme. "*Aghh!*" he grunted. "It's bad enough the fumes of coal may be, but this smell is worse. If I'd not met one once before, I'd never believe there'd be such beasts. In that, the Old Country is better than the new. *Ehu!*"

The wait was longer this time, and the moon crept up until its light shone full in the clearing. Ellowan tossed the runes again, but they were still in the same pattern, and he muttered. Three times should be proof enough, but their prediction had still not come true. Then the faint sound of a car came from down the lane, and he watched tensely until it appeared.

It was the right one, with the little silvered figure shining on the top of the radiator. A low, heavy convertible it was, chosen with the obvious bad taste and love of display that were typical of the Wilsons, but money in goodly quantity had gone into its purchase. Inside, the elf made out the fat, smirking face of Hubert Wilson, and the troubled face of Mary Kroning.

Wilson swung it up in a rush, braked sharply where the wheel marks were thickest, gunned the motor, and cut it off. Out of the car came words in Wilson's pompous voice.

"Runs pretty sweet, now. But the way Donahue fixes cars, I suppose it'll go to pieces again in a week. Charged me sixty bucks for the work, and probably palmed off the shoddiest material he could find. I told him so, too."

Mary's weak protest sounded tired and Ellowan guessed that there had been little sleep for her the night before. "I don't think Mr. Donahue would do that to you. He's always been very careful in the work he did for us, and his prices are lower than we can get elsewhere."

"Sure, why wouldn't they be, when it's the only way he can get work? Anyway, he's crazy enough to think you'll marry that dumb son of his." Wilson moved slightly on the seat, and Mary drew back into a corner. "And that reminds me. I heard you were out with him last night, and I don't like it. Probably got in trouble and kicked out of college, so he comes sneaking back here to his father. You keep away from him, understand? I don't want my girl going with such people."

"He's not dumb, and he didn't get in trouble. I think—" She checked the words quickly, and deliberately softened her voice. "I'm not engaged to you yet, Hubert, and I don't think you should try to dictate my choice of friends. I've known Pat for years. Why shouldn't I see him when he returns?"

"Because I don't like it and won't have it! I used to think you were sweet on him, but that's all done. Anyway, he couldn't take you to the movies now, even the cheap ones.

His old man's spent most of his money fixing up the shop and just paid back the loan from our bank."

"Let's not argue, Hubert. I'm tired, too tired for another quarrel. I wish you'd take me home."

"Aw, it's only eleven. Stay here a little while and we'll go over to the Brown Pudding Inn. It's the most expensive place around, and they've got an orchestra that's really hot!"

"I'm tired, Hubert, and I don't want to go to the Inn. I've been looking for work all day. Take me home and I'll see you tomorrow and let you take me to the Inn if you want."

"If that's the way you feel." He straightened up slowly, a petulant frown on his face. "Anyway, I told you you didn't need work; I'll send your dad to the hospital and take care of you if you'll promise to marry me. Oh, all right. But why don't you let me get you a job in the bank? All I gotta do is say the word, and you're hired."

Ellowan saw that Wilson was making slow signs of giving in and leaving, and he decided it was time to act. The big rabbit at his feet thumped heavily at his orders, then loyalty conquered instinct, and it moved off. As it left, the elf saw two pairs of eyes shining in the underbrush, and the skunks poked sharp little heads through, gazing at the quantity of food nearer the car. They moved forward slowly, uncertain of the auto, but fairly confident of their natural protection.

WILSON was grabbing for the brake when the rabbit scampered out of the woods into the clearing and headed for the car. With a bound it hopped to the running board, jumped from there to the hood of the engine, and cleared the windshield to land in Wilson's lap. His clawing hands missed it, and it was in the back seat, leaving a streak of mud on the newly laundered suit, and a scratch from a sharp toenail on his forehead. The words he said were ones no lady should hear from a man.

Again it bounced, landing on his head, then thumping down on the hood again. Wilson sprawled out, diving for it, and the rabbit hit the ground and began circling the man, just out of reach. "Get out of that car and help me catch this thing!" he shouted at Mary. "For the love of Peter, don't sit there like a bump on a log! Aren't there any brains under your make-up?"

"Leave it alone, and come back to the car. You can't catch it, and I want to go back."

"I don't care what you want; I'll fix this fellow." He stopped his frantic attempts, and climbed back in the car. "Maybe I can't catch it, but we'll see what the car can do."

Ellowan's eyes turned back to the skunks, moving along toward the manna from heaven they saw and smelled in the clearing. They knew perfectly well that the insane hoppings of the rabbit were harmless, and took no notice of them.

Wilson gunned the motor and threw the machine into second savagely. It jerked forward, straight at the rabbit—and straight for the skunks. This was a new menace to them, and they jerked their heads up and erected the danger signal of their tails. Wilson did not see them, nor did he notice a sudden change in the radiator cap. The two brass hands were creeping slowly up over the little nose.

The car bucked and backfired, and the wheels seemed filled with life, trying to drag the car to the right.

The gear lever shifted suddenly to neutral, and the car stopped. Alert and poised for action, the skunks were waiting on a hair-trigger balance; the rabbit decided it was time to leave.

But now Wilson's anger was transferred to the car, and he fought it fiercely, jamming it back into gear. It backfired again, and the skunks decided they had waited long enough. With a unison of action that seemed pre-planned, they opened fire, and the wind favored them. Mary took her frightened eyes off Wilson and tried to hide her nose from the stench. Wilson let go of the wheel, and his face turned pale and sick.

But the car, left without a guiding hand, took matters onto itself. The front end jumped up and twisted around, and the machine bobbed in a crazy circle, streaking away from the skunks. It slowed and the engine sputtered and coughed, then seemed to decide things could be no worse than they were, and stopped.

Wilson opened his mouth and spilled out words, first at the car, then at Mary. She bore it in stolid silence for a few minutes, but there are limits to all things, even the need of money. Ellowan grinned as she reached for the door and climbed out, turning down the lane toward the general highway and leaving young Wilson ranting to himself.

Then a vagary of the wind let a few whiffs of the air from the clearing reach him, and the elf ran back toward his bicycle. His work was done, and it was an excellent time to leave.

Business in the smithy was slack the next day, and Donahue was across the street playing billiards, when Pat came into the shop in the early afternoon, looking much more cheerful than previously. "Mary's given up Wilson," he announced, as he might have spoken of discovering perpetual motion. "She called me up this morning, and we've been talking things over since then. I don't know what happened, but she's through with him."

"Eh, now, and it's glad I am to hear that." Ellowan dropped his work and squatted on a bench across from the boy, wondering how well she had rid herself of the smell of skunk. "And did she tell you she'd be marrying you?"

Some of the joy went out of Pat's face. "No, but she practically did. I've got to get a job, though, paying enough to support her and help the family along. She'll probably find work for a while, and it won't take so terribly much. They've almost enough to live on. But I'll need at least twice as much as I can make here."

"There'd be money in the selling of handmade brass trinkets," the elf pointed out again. "A very good sum, indeed, and immediately. Now, I've been doing some work with figures, and I'm thinking you'd be making more than you need, and could pay back the expense of the shop in little time, if your craftsmen knew the knack of the material."

"I figured it up, too, from the letter you got giving prices, and there's a gold mine in it for a plant with a few workers. But where can I get men who can do the type of work you turn out? That's where the money is. And where would I get the initial outlay?"

"All in good time now." Ellowan filled his pipe and puffed at it thoughtfully. "It seems that the Wilsons have arrived as they telephoned. A bit of business and we'll talk this over afterwards, lad."

The Wilsons had indeed arrived, Hubert's car in front, driven by the chauffeur, and the banker driving his own car at a good distance off. Hubert Wilson stood on the front bumper of his auto, looking more miserable than seemed possible; his hand rested on the silvered radiator cap, and his thumb was caught between the little brass arms. The boys along the street added nothing to his comfort.

The older Wilson came bristling in, growling gruff words. "I'll slap a suit on you that'll make your ears ring," he threatened. "Hubert's caught in that thing you made, and can't get loose, unless we amputate his thumb. The metal simply can't be cut, for some reason."

"That suit now," the elf answered. "It might not help the thumb, and there's little fault I have in the matter. 'Tis his own carelessness. You should know that."

Since bluffing didn't work, Wilson tried the only other argument he knew. "All right, but get him loose. I'll give you fifty dollars for it and forget the whole thing."

Ellowan demurred. "There's a most unpleasant odor about the car," he pointed out. "I'm overly sensitive to such an odor, and there's fear in my heart that it might be poisonous to me. But if you'll come into the garage, I'll be glad indeed to talk of the matter with you."

Back in the building, the banker stormed and shouted, but it did him no good. The quiet words of the elf, inaudible to Pat, conquered in the end. "And I'll have it in cash, you understand," he finished. "I'm not used to these checks, nor liking of them."

Wilson looked through a window at the sight of his son caught in that humiliating position and gave in. "Robber!" he growled. "I'll send a boy with it and to fetch your note." He stalked out of the shop quickly, climbed into his car, and drove off toward the bank.

Ellowan waited until the boy showed up, and exchanged a package for a piece of paper from the elf. Then he wrapped his face in moist cloths and took his tools out where Hubert Wilson stood. With a direction of purpose that gave no heed to the swearing and pleading of the man, he applied his little pinchers and pulled the arms loose from the thumb; the brass responded easily to his tug.

"And now," he said, unscrewing the cap and substituting one with a greyhound on it, "you'd best be off. We'll not be wanting your trade hereafter." He swung quickly into the shop, unmindful of the retort that reached his ears, and watched the car pull away. When the sickness from the stench left him, he turned back to Pat.

"Now, as I was saying, there's money in copper artistry. And there's a building down the street that'll be lending itself perfectly to the work. It's quite cheap you could get it. As for the tools you'd need, they'd be few, since handwork is better for this than the cleverness of many machines."

"It would take at least three thousand dollars to start, and I'd have to get the workers, and pay them." Pat shook his head sadly. "Better forget it, Ellowan."

"Eh, so? And it's mistaken you are. In this pile you'll find the sum of five thousand of your dollars, which should start the shop and let you marry the girl when she will." He tossed the package over casually.

Pat grinned, but shoved it back. "So you blackmailed Wilson, did

you? That's a high price for letting the youngster loose."

"It's not too high, I'm thinking, since it's but a loan. You'll be paying me, and I'll give it to him—with five percent of interest, to be sure. And perhaps you'd turn up your nose at a chance to marry the girl when it's only a business agreement?"

Pat pocketed the money. "That way, I'll take it, provided you let me pay you at six percent. How long does your note run?"

"Five years, and you'll pay me but five percent, as I pay the banker. I'm tired indeed of the arguing you'd be doing." Ellowan turned back to his workroom. "Now it's workers you need, eh?"

"And it's workers I won't find, probably. Where can brass craftsmen be found who can do any amount of work by hand?"

The elf grinned and disappeared into the shop. He whistled once and reappeared, but not alone. Behind him were three others like him, differing but little, and all clearly of the Little People. They were dressed in brown leather clothes of a cut older than the mechanical age, but about their noses were filters with wires leading down to little batteries at their belts. Ellowan chuckled.

"Here, now, are the workers I brought back for you," he told Pat. "You'll find them quick with their hands and good workers, not greedy for money. But you'll be needing one of those machines that'd make ozone for the whole shop—only a little, but enough to counteract the poison of the air. 'Tis a marvelous invention. Now be off with you, and leave me with my friends. I'd have none of your thanks."

As Pat went out, shaking his head but smiling, the four elves turned back to the workroom, and Ellowan knew his task was well done. The boy would have the girl and his work would prosper, while the elf would no longer be alone in a world of men.

One of the others drew off his filter and tested the air. "Bad," he grunted. "But now that you've wakened us, there seems little enough harm in it. Perchance the years of sleep have given us strength against the poison fumes."

More likely it was the call to work, Ellowan reflected, stronger even than the poisons of the air. And, some day when the boy's plant expanded, the call would be greater, and others might be awakened until the Little People could come into their own again. They were sleeping in the hills now, but not for long.

IT HAPPENS TWICE AT LEAST

by WILLY LEY

Things happen by threes—and the law of averages *does not work!* A fascinating article proving the old superstition is based on truth!

May 23, 1939. The U. S. submarine *Squalus* sunk off New Portsmouth, N. H., with 59 men aboard. 33 saved, 26 dead. Reason for sinking—probably —valve trouble.

June 1, 1939. The British submarine *Thetis* sunk in Liverpool Bay with 103 people aboard. Only 4 escaped, the others dead. Reason unknown.

June 15, 1939. The French submarine *Phenix* sunk off the coast of French Indo-China with 71 men aboard. No survivors. Reason unknown.

NEVER, during the last few years, has there been a similar series of tragic and impressive events like these three submarine disasters that took place in less than a month. But aside from the human tragedy, the whole is only one more illustration of that mysterious and inexplicable tendency of events either to repeat themselves in quick succession or else to occur almost simultaneously in different places.

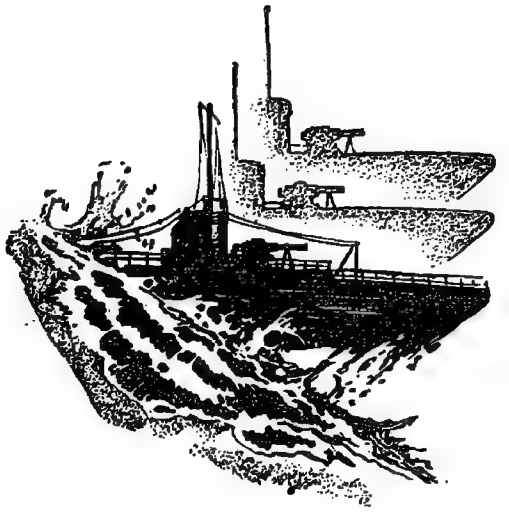
Early in 1930 a gasometer, containing large quantities of illuminating gas, exploded in Berlin. Fortunately, since it happened during the early-morning hours, and since the Sellerstrasse, on which three of these big containers were located, is not an important thoroughfare, nobody was seriously hurt. The experts were baffled by the occurrence —nothing like that had happened for at least three decades, and it had been firmly believed that it could not happen.

Not long afterward "history repeated itself," a gasometer at Siebenkirchen — Saar district — exploded. It was the biggest on the European continent, and this time the catastrophe was costly, about a hundred dead. No reason for the explosion could be ascertained.

Only a week or so later a third gasometer somewhere else in Europe went up in a large flash.

That tendency of events to repeat themselves has not yet resulted in scientific theories, but it has found recognition in a number of sayings in almost every living or dead language. *"Lupus in fabula,"* said the Romans. It still holds true. Talk to your friend Jim about Jack and Jack will ring your doorbell or call you by telephone. Not every time, to be sure, but much more frequently than can be "explained" by the word "coincidence." The Greeks had a saying about three like events. In modern French there exists the proverb: *"Pas un sans trois,"* which is, in literal translation, "No one without three," meaning that one event is usually expanding into three of the same kind. In English you say somewhat more pessimistically, "It never rains but it pours," while German, wholly pessimistic, declares: *"Ein Unglück kommt selten allein."* "Bad luck rarely comes single—or alone."

Fortunately it is not only bad luck that comes in twos and threes,



but good luck or indifferent events do the same. These well-known "runs of luck" or "streaks" have nothing to do with periods or periodicity, they are something quite different.

A manufacturer might find himself out of orders to be filled once a year in summer when most of his regular customers are either enjoying vacations or thinking about them. Such a seasonal "recession" certainly shows periodicity—of about one year—but it has none of the characteristics of a "run of luck" or "streak." Besides it can be easily explained. It would be a perfect example for a "streak"—or in more fancy language for the "multiplicity of events"—however, if suddenly half a dozen customers of said manufacturer decide to stay home for *various* reasons and to place orders with him so that business remains normal when it was not expected to do so.

The important point is that the customers in the example given do not give up their vacations for the same reason, say war rumors. A true "run of luck," or "series," as the biologist Dr. Paul Kammerer termed it, has no explanation; it just happens.

THERE is certainly no explanation for anything so outside of the sphere of human influence, of human activities, as the one observed by Dr. William Beebe and related in his book, "The Arcturus Adventure."

The expedition was lying off the shore of Albemarle Island, the largest of the Galàpagos group, observing an outbreak of a volcano that sent streams of white-hot lava into the sea.

Dr. Beebe wrote:

> Just before dawn, when three of us were watching silently with all our eyes, a mighty shooting star struck itself alight on the rim of our atmosphere, and in a blaze of white comet light, fell silently and accurately into the center of the lava flow. *After the identical happening of last evening* this appeared more than cosmic, it seemed intentional, and for a few moments I think the state of mind of all of us reverted to that of our distant forefathers when signs and symbols and portents regulated all of life. When the possible combinations of the temporal and spatial arrival of a shooting star is considered, it was assuredly an astounding thing that two such mighty meteors should have taken this exact course.

Mention of the Galàpagos Islands inevitably evokes the memory of Charles Darwin, who received inspiration for his daring theory of evolution on just those shores. But when he, after very many years of work, was just about ready to publish the results of his studies, he received a manuscript from Wallace, propounding theories very similar to those Darwin had nursed secretly for so long a time.

Another strange series in the field of natural history occurred only recently. The American ornithologist, Dr. Chapin, had for about fifteen

years a large feather of an unknown bird in a collection under his care. Although he untiringly tried to identify that feather, he failed completely. It did not match any known bird and there was nobody who had ever seen anything like it. (The feather had been taken not from a living or stuffed bird, but from the headdress of a Negro chieftain in Africa.) Then, one day, Dr. Chapin discovered two specimens of his much-hunted unknown bird in a "worthless" collection that had been locked away in an unused room in the Museum of Tervueren in Belgium. That same day he met with an old acquaintance of his who told him that he had eaten that kind of bird many years earlier in Africa. This is, condensed, the story of the discovery of *Afropavo congensis*—the Congo peacock.

Another example: Sir John Jamison reported as early as March 18, 1817, that the female of the Australian platypus lays eggs. The report was not credited by the majority of scientists at that time, and the few that dared to believe it had no means of proving it. In fact, it was not definitely ascertained whether platypus was oviparous or viviparous to the complete satisfaction of zoölogists until the year 1884. During that year the egg-laying habit was verified about platypus by Dr. W. H. Caldwell of Australia and about echidna—platypus' nearest living relative—by Dr. Wilhelm Haacke of Germany, who was then traveling in Australia. Dr. Caldwell made his discovery during the second week of August, 1884; Dr. Haacke made his on the 26th of August. None knew of the other and both reported their discoveries in different Australian cities on the same day! In science, sport, fiction —everywhere series appear.

"Series" like that are beautiful material for features like John Hix's "Strange as it may seem," and Ripley's "Believe it or not," and in looking through Hix's "Scrapbook" I actually found the following, which deserves mention:

Two golf players, their names being reported as James Shevlin and Howard Hiegel, playing in Bermuda in 1928, made "holes-in-one" at the same 182-yard hole in the same round. Golf is certainly a game of skill, but a hole-in-one is, as every golf player will acknowledge, very much a matter of luck. That two—presumably equally skilled—players should either display the same unbelievable skill or have the same amount of good luck in succession makes the thing a matter of record.

"Series" are not confined to events and happenings; there are also series of names. That the three most famous lepidopterologists—butterfly experts—of prewar times had the family names of Stand*fuss*, Schau*fuss*, and Streck*fuss* is such a series.

L. Sprague de Camp's ichthyologist, "Vernon Brock," who was conceived as a story hero and then announced his actual existence—name,

approximate age, and profession all correct—is another series of names.

A third one, a little different but interesting for just that reason, can be found in the annals of geology. One of the most interesting geological theories—though probably wrong—about the movement of the earth's crust was advanced by a Catholic priest, Pater Damian Kreichgauer. His theory had two predecessors, advanced by the Jesuit Pater Kolberg and the nobleman Karl Freiherr Löffelholz von Colberg. A double series of two links each, linked together by Pater Kolberg—who belongs in the middle for chronological reasons, not because I need him there.

What is all this supposed to mean? There is, evidently, no sense in a collection of coincidences that may be strange, but yet are nothing but coincidences.

Are they really nothing but coincidences?

In describing them I used repeatedly the term "series," which I borrowed from Dr. Paul Kammerer, a Vienna biologist famous for his researches on heredity. Like anybody else, Kammerer occasionally ran into "series" of coincidences—trivial things of no importance or consequence—similar to the following two examples from my own experience:

One afternoon—I had arrived in the United States only about ten weeks previous to that date—one of *Harper's* authors, Peter van Dresser, corrected a linguistic mistake I had just made. The same night I had dinner with the publisher, Tom Davin, who gave me a copy of H. L. Mencken's "American Language," a book I did not know of then. Coming home I opened it near the middle and at once saw exactly the same explanation of a certain American usage I had received verbally the same afternoon. I doubt whether Peter van Dresser had ever thoroughly read Mencken's book—I know that he did not possess it.

More recently I experienced a similar series. John Campbell told me one day that he had personally observed ball lightning. Coming home I took a volume of a magazine dealing with natural history—the *Kosmos*—from my bookshelf to look for a certain picture. I may mention that the magazine in question deals principally with biology, paleontology, zoölogy, and evolution, and only rarely with other subjects. Opening the bound volume my eye fell on an article consisting of a collection of ball-lightning observations. And the very next day a neighbor with only a very mild interest in science came in for a little chat and, when—actually—speaking of the weather told me about a personal observation of ball lightning in France, asking me whether such phenomena really existed.

Dr. Kammerer experienced, as I said, a number of series of similar nature. His interest was deepened by a series of three very disastrous railroad accidents in Europe in the early '20s—three accidents occurring within two weeks and looking remarkably alike. The final outcome of his interest was a volume of four hundred and eighty-six pages—personally I think that four hundred of them are superfluous—entitled, *"Das Gesetz der Serie,"* ("The Law of Series.")

Unfortunately, Kammerer did not state such a—supposed—law in his book. He merely collected a number of instances that might be termed "series"—the majority of them not very convincing—and

tried to classify them. After that he hinted at suspecting every unusual event tends to grow into a series of like events.

If there were such a law, there should be a condition where it can be most easily recognized—just as the laws of gravity are easier to recognize in a vacuum than in an atmosphere where other influences blur the picture. Such a condition does exist in pure chance, where experience, skill, practice, or special talents do not count; for example in coin flipping, done preferably by a simple mechanism of some kind.

The laws of chance state that if you flip a quarter a thousand times "heads" will show about five hundred times and "tails" also about five hundred times. The larger the number of experiments, the higher the probability that both sides will show equally often. It does work out that way if you muster the necessary patience to do it a thousand or, better, ten thousand times. Many experiments, undertaken by many different people, have proven that it is true. But, if you count not only the final results—as is usually done—but keep track of every drop of the coin, you will see upon examination that a very pronounced law of series has edged its way into the generally ruling law of averages.

For a thousand throws you may get five hundred and ten times "heads" and four hundred and ninety times "tails." But if you look at the numbers from say two hundred to two hundred and twenty-five you'll probably find that you have five times "heads" in succession, then once "tails," then four times "heads," once again "tails," then three times "heads," followed by four times "tails," and the remainder "heads" again. While the laws of chance state that in a thousands throws about five hundred should be "heads," they do *not* say that "heads" and "tails" will alternate. Fact is that they do not. Fact is, also, that they usually form recognizable series.

AN EVEN BETTER example is provided by the roulette wheel. A normal roulette wheel shows thirty-seven holes, one green—zero—the others alternately red and black.* The numbers in these holes are not placed in succession so that there are not alternate black and red numbers on the roulette table. Number one is red, two is black, three is red again on one end, while thirty-five is black and thirty-six red on the other end. But in between there are a few *pairs* of black and red numbers. Still, the chances that the little white ball falls into a red hole are just as good as the chances that it falls into a black hole, if you do not count the occasional zero which makes the bank reap in all the profit. The roulette wheel is designed to operate on pure chance, and the great legal roulette casinos take every conceivable precaution that it *does* operate on chance only. As soon as the slightest friction in a wheel is discovered, or as soon as the daily measurements show that one of the tables is tilting only a minute fraction of an inch, that wheel or that table is immediately closed.

In practically every one of the great casinos, official scores of one of the tables is being kept. These official scores are open to inspection by anyone asking to see them, and they are usually even published. The publication permits following

* There exists a variety that has thirty-eight holes, the thirty-eighth being 00—double zero—but this type is considered unfair.

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the game at that table as if one had been present. All those that invent systems to eliminate chance in their gambling use them for their preliminary calculations.

All the roulette scores show very pronounced "series" of various kinds. While the sum of red or black numbers during a week, or even only a day, is doubtless equal —not counting the zeros—one of the two colors usually dominates for a certain time, say for half an hour or so. If red be the dominating color for about half an hour, during which time the roulette wheel spins about thirty times, the score would probably read:

4 red	numbers in succession
	2 black numbers in succession
3 red	
	1 black
3	
	1
4	
	2
3	
	1
6	
	3 "

This score, which looks like hundreds I have seen published, as well as observed directly, shows one kind of series that is expressed simply by the dominating of red. But it also contains twice the sequence four red/ two black/ three red and three times a black number following after three red numbers.

Lacking a roulette wheel, you can perform a similar experiment with a few decks of poker cards, the more the better. Shuffle them thoroughly, put them on the table in an irregular heap and have somebody draw one card after another from that heap. The results you get will look very much like roulette scores. But to establish proof for the existence of series—if proof should be needed —this method is not quite as good as the roulette wheel, because you

have a limited number of cards. If it should happen that red dominates during the first fifty trials, black has to dominate during the second fifty trials—if you use a hundred cards. But the first fifty cards are "good"; it is only the second half of the total number which might give confusing results.

Many roulette gamblers have a pretty good idea of all this. Before they risk their chips they observe for some ten minutes to find out whether the "day is black"—or "red." It does not always help them very much to observe, because the series they expect to last expires often enough just at the moment when they join the game.

Sometimes "series" in a roulette room extend over several tables, I have heard—in Zoppot near Danzig—that the number twenty-one was announced practically simultaneously from three tables. And every croupier, when asked, can tell of dozens or even hundreds of similar instances. Everybody who sells things knows of articles unsalable for years which are suddenly grabbed by an eager public until only one or two are left and then again become unsalable for a year. Point is again that that sudden demand has no reason at all, that it concentrates upon only one store, that it defies explanation—in short, that it just happens.

There is no need to continue with examples of series. Everybody, once his attention is called to the existence of them, will remember a sufficient number from his own experience to set him thinking for days. These examples are given mainly for the purpose of explaining what is meant by the term "series." Just to be certain that no "false series" comes to somebody's memory, I'll attempt to construct an example of such a "false series."

Some time ago an act of "mercy killing" aroused widespread attention and debate. If five or six other fathers of similarly "unfit" children had done the same, following the example of the first, it would have been a series of mercy killings in the sense in which the word "series" is commonly used in the English language. But as we understand the term it would not have been a "series," only a logical sequence of like events, identical solutions to identical problems executed in imitation of the first example.

A TRUE series has no common cause, it has no logic and no periodicity. In fact it has as many different causes as it has links. It happens against logic which makes it remarkable; it occasionally disturbs otherwise established periods. Trying to define the term series in strict language we may say: "A series consists of two or more facts—'facts' meaning happenings as well as names, dates, figures, melodies, colors, smells or whatever can be described by the use of adjectives—occurring either simultaneously in different places, or successively in the same place, or in different places within a certain frame of reference, normally the observer."

While that definition of a "series" sounds fairly complicated, a supposed law of series is somewhat easier to state. Heisenberg has pointed out that *the laws of probability do not apply to small numbers.* This is only a negative statement, proceeding one step farther and making a positive statement one can say: *"Within narrow limits facts prefer to repeat rather than to change, although in wide limits the*

number of changes complies closely with the laws of chance."

The roulette wheel provides an additional illustration. The "zero," neglected in our previous investigations, should show once in about forty spins of the wheel, roughly once every half hour. I have seen myself that there was no zero for about two hours, then it came twice in succession and twice more soon after.

An analogous case would be that a coin stands on edge—which, naturally, occurs much less frequently than zero on the roulette. But it can safely be said that if the coin is going to stand on edge three times in a thousand throws, it is probable that these three times occur in close intervals or even in succession. What we do not know in advance is whether the coin will stand on edge at all, while we do know how often every side of it will show.

Such a law of series is not quite as useless a philosophical conception as may be thought. There are a fair number of instances where it can be utilized, although it would be senseless to try to escape from it. There just is no escape from natural laws.

I have observed more than once that several competing movie magazines portrayed the same screen star on their covers during the same month, or in successive months. The covers were printed before the competing magazines appeared on the newsstands and there was no specific reason to use that particular star's picture. It just happened —like a typical series. It was one, of course.

I know of some newspaper editors who have already learned to avoid series of that kind by telephoning each other to make certain that they will not use the same headlines, or, at least, not the same wording of the headlines for the next morning's edition. Occasionally it happens in spite of the telephoning habit, when both editors forget to do it, or do not find the time, or when they believe that their headline would be unique.

I know that psychologists who have observed series, as well as anybody else, have their own explanation. They call it "mental tuning" or something to that effect. This explanation is usually applied to series of railroad accidents or airplane crashes.

The reasoning goes something like this: If somewhere a railroad accident happens on account of mechanical faults or negligence of some kind, everybody learns about it through the press the same day.

"I TALKED WITH GOD"

(yes, I did—actually and literally

and, as a result of that little talk with God some ten years ago, a strange new Power came into my life. After 43 years of horrible, sickening, dismal failure, this strange Power brought to me a sense of overwhelming victory, and I have been overcoming every undesirable condition of my life ever since. What a change it was. Now—I have credit at more than one bank, I own a beautiful home, drive a lovely car, own a newspaper and a large office building, and my wife and family are amply provided for after I leave for shores unknown. In addition to these material benefits, I have a sweet peace in my life. I am happy as happy can be. No circumstance ever upsets me, for I have learned how to draw upon the invisible God-Law, under any and all circumstances.

You too may find and use the same staggering Power of the God-Law that I use. It can bring to you too, whatever things are right and proper for you to have. Do you believe this? It won't cost much to find out—just a penny post-card or a letter, addressed to Dr. Frank B. Robinson, Dept. 8, Moscow, Idaho, will bring you the story of the most fascinating success of the century. And the same Power I use is here for your use too. I'll be glad to tell you about it. All information about this experience will be sent you free, of course. The address again—Dr. Frank B. Robinson, Dept. 8, Moscow, Idaho. Advt. Copyright 1939 Frank B. Robinson.

"Everybody" includes all other railway engineers.

They then begin to wonder whether there is a possibility for a similar failure or negligence on their own line. And, trying hard to avoid mistakes, they make them and other accidents are the result. This explanation might be true in a very small number of cases—a number that is, in my opinion, so small as to be almost negligible. An accident usually results in a thorough checking of all mechanical parts, signals, crossings, et cetera. If there are hidden flaws, they are usually found. And mechanisms don't wonder and don't try to avoid mistakes. Besides, a single mistake normally does not lead to an accident. There have to be several mistakes that do not cancel each other out but add up. And that is the variety of causes for the various links in a series again in a very flimsy disguise. That the psychological explanation does not apply to the recent series of submarine disasters is evident; whatever the individual causes of the disasters were, they were not alike. Only the results.

It is true that psychological conditions may produce "series" in certain cases. In games of skill, for example, as in archery or similar competitive avocations, any single player is apt to get "jittery" and to make a series of mistakes after his first mistake. And his behavior and example might well influence the others to lose their composure, too. But that is not a true series because it is all due to a single cause, the first mistake of the first man.

When I was already thinking of writing this article I experienced an everyday series of trivial events; the numbers of bright red hats and shoes during a subway ride. Since I was thinking of series, I paid special attention. But two hours later, on the way back, the nearest to red that could be found was a hat of dirty orange color—and I certainly was "mentally tuned" to red accessories.

And I certainly would like to know how psychologists would explain two cases related by Dr. Kammerer. One concerns an Austrian official who had four daughters, every one of them born on August 7th in four successive years.

The other example has to do with the murder trial of Franziska Klein, held in Vienna in 1905. The somewhat humorous series consisted of an overwhelming majority of persons that were hard of hearing among the numerous witnesses—explanation for their coming together in that case is lacking.

But it is true that the law of series might be responsible for a number of things belonging to the realm of psychology. There are many people who believe in "runs of luck"—good luck as well as bad luck. To a certain extent they are perfectly justified to do so and the man who says: "I'm quitting for the day, everything seems to go haywire," is fairly close to the truth. His quitting will probably not end the series of unpleasant events, but may lead it into less dangerous channels. If you find yourself in a series of breaking dishes, confine your activities to the least expensive kind you have around. You won't escape the series, but the consequences will be less severe. So far, so good—but when the observance of series becomes a mania it is time for the psychologist to step into the picture.

The law of series is responsible for a few more things. I have met sev-

eral people that asserted that their dreams often come true. I put that down to logical prophecies of the outcome of certain situations, worked out subconsciously and coming to the surface in the form of dreams. But then I had an experience that showed a series might be responsible for such a belief just as well.

One morning I woke up with a dream that I had been in a concert hall—no specific one—where the orchestra played Beethoven's Counter Dances and the Ballet from the opera "Prince Igor." Soon after getting up I turned on my radio—Station WQXR—and the first melody I heard was the Ballet from the opera "Prince Igor." Beethoven's Counter Dances followed soon after. I am certain that I did not hear an announcement of the program the day before, because I was not listening to the radio; and I did not read it in the program booklet, because I did not have one, and it does not list the programs in detail; and the only radio within earshot —assuming that I might have heard the announcement while half awake —did not work at all that morning. The usual psychological explanations, therefore, did not apply—it was simply a series.

Other superstitions—at least a good many of them—may also be caused by series. One single strange event may go unnoticed or, if noticed, may soon be forgotten. But a series of such events is impressive and not so easily forgotten. And since there is no explanation, the series is a superstition in the raw. How many people are there that say —not openly, of course—"That fellow Jones brings me bad luck. Every time I see him something is bound to go wrong." Which is probably correct as far as the latter part of the statement goes, only Mr. Jones is absolutely innocent, and not even the innocent cause. He just happens to be a link in a series of unpleasant events to somebody else.

I DARE to extend this reasoning even to fortunetelling. Fortunetelling from free teacup reading to two-hundred-and-fifty-dollar horoscopes is justly regarded as a very gross form of superstition. But it has millions of followers—people who are ready to swear that on more than one occasion future events were correctly foretold to them.

Now the general principle of fortunetelling is very simple. The list of things that are likely to happen to the average human being is not long. Illness; death—of friends or relatives; travel; loss or change of job; romance or divorce; change of domicile; mail containing this or that—about a dozen taken all together. If you select half of them, omitting those that are too unlikely, judging from age, appearance, and sex of the client, the chances are pretty good that some of them will come true sooner or later. Careful wording which leaves inconspicuous blank spaces to be filled in by the imagination of the client does the rest. And those prophesies that do not come true are soon forgotten.

Again, however, the number of good guesses is noticeably larger than it should be. And, occasionally, the prophecies are wrong, without exception, which is also unlikely. These deviations from the laws of probability become understandable if the law of series is applied. Hits and misses dominate in series—and occasionally the prophecy itself may be the first link of a series that is forming itself, which accounts for those surprisingly right predictions.

Continued from page 6

in it. And Russell's style did little to compensate for this. But I suppose everybody can't be a Charles Fort. I suggest reprinting "The Book of the Damned" and "New Lands" serially.

I only read two stories in the October Unknown—and after experiencing a double let-down I decided not to attempt any of the others. "Blue and Silver Brocade" was tritely dull. "The Elder Gods" was a very inauspicious finale for a top-notch author. I had to force myself on continually—and at that I didn't finish the novel. Not exactly dull, but just not attention-holding, if you get what I mean. It was the only Stuart yarn, with the possible exception of "Elimination," that I didn't care for. Sorry, Mr. Campbell. The cover of the magazine left quite a lot to be desired, besides.

Story ratings are incomplete, but necessarily so, for my time doesn't permit my reading all stories. But I don't fail to get the magazines every month, which is, I think, the main point. For the chains of habit are strong.—Langley Searles, 19 East 235th St., New York, N. Y.

—and the introspectionists ran the Inquisition; it isn't the method, it's the animal that uses it.

Dear Mr. Campbell:

I have read with much interest L. Sprague de Camp's letter on the subject of Yoga, and particularly his phrase about "the utter worthlessness of introspection as a method of finding out what is and what isn't." To say the least, Mr. de Camp does not hesitate to make it clear that he considers science the main object of life, all else being less than dust beneath his chariot wheels. But it is strange how circumstances can alter views. Some day, in different conditions, Mr. de Camp may find himself thinking differently.

At the time of writing, I and my wife and my five-year-old daughter are waiting patiently for the most scientific people on earth to blow us into bloody shreds by the most up-to-date scientific methods. If they don't do it, it will be because we are ready and prepared to adopt the advice of an ancient introspectionist named Confucius who, when asked to express the code of life in one word, said, "Reciprocity."

Mr de Camp can, of course, point out that science comes in pretty handy for the purpose of reciprocating, but that does not rid us of the sad fact that we must turn to Satan to cast out sin. If Mr. de Camp, for once, likes to indulge in a little deep thinking, as distinct from the "scientific method," he can start off with the indisputable fact that the world's most scientific nations are the most uncivilized. That nasty fact is in no way condemnatory of science, neither does it belittle scientists, but it does suggest that the time is long overdue when science should go hand in hand with some useful introspection. It can be said in favor of navel-contemplators that they were never bomb-droppers.—Eric Frank Russell, 44, Orrell Road, Orrell, Liverpool, 20, England.

Mr. MacCormac, we understand, may now be engaged in operating the wrong kind of a "typewriter." He's a Canadian.

Dear Mr. Campbell:

I find that the October number is a pretty good issue. "The Elder Gods," "Anything," and "The Enchanted Week End" were three outstanding stories. But I'll comment on them later. First, I must take the cover apart.

If you ask me, the cover is not so hot. In the first place, the painting is ragged and splotchy, and done in colors that are too bright. Also, I think the picturization of the gods—and Daron, too—is very poor and not at all as—er, Stuart—represented it and I imagined it. So I am afraid you will have to consider this a vote against future covers by Modest Stein.

Now to get back to the stories. "The Elder Gods" takes first place on the strength of its writing alone. The author's famous style is much in evidence and carries a rather weak plot along very satisfactorily. The only thing that made the plot at all worth while was the philosophy contained in it, the philosophy which you mentioned in last month's blurb. I will not comment further on the story, except to say that I deeply regret that its author must cease writing science-fiction and fantasy because of outside work. His loss is a blow, just as was the loss of Weinbaum.

Now, I am afraid I will have to kick a little bit about artist Isip. I like his work I think he has earned a place on *Astounding's* and Unknown's art staff, but I do think he is being definitely overworked.

He has done seven illustrations for *Astounding's* last serial, four for Evans' novelette, and now seven more for Stuart's novel, along with numerous pictures for shorter stories. Now I think you ought to cut down a little bit on him and give Cartier, who is your supreme ace, and the other boys a chance. And, incidentally, here's a warning. I see you're printing a sequel to "Flame Winds." If you let Orban illustrate the sequel as he did the original, I am really going to get mad! I think Orban is the next to the worst cartoonist you use. The worst is—well, I'll get to that later.

In second place, we have "Anything." The fact that it was written by my favorite fantastic short story writer has nothing to do with my placing it in that position. I read the story through without noticing who wrote it, and enjoyed it every bit as much as other stories by the author which I have read. Now that I realize the writer's identity, I marvel at his ability to consistently turn out such delightful little shorts. So here's a vote for more stories—as many as you can get into print—by Philip St. John. Isip's picture was below his usual standard.

I was much prejudiced against "The Enchanted Week End" even before I began reading it, because of those perfectly hideous illustrations by Gilmore. In my opinion, Gilmore is the worst fantasy artist whose work I have seen. He is even worse than that Wert you sprung on us in *Astounding*—and that's going some! Gilmore has never drawn a picture worthy to be reproduced in the lowliest dime magazine. You may can him—but quick!

The story, however, was very enjoyable. I think it could have been somewhat shorter—compressed into a novelette, preferably, but otherwise it was beyond reproach. I have never before heard of MacCormac, but I would like to see more of him in the future.

In fourth place is "A God in a Garden." Although not an outstanding yarn, it bore out my assertion in an earlier letter that "Theodore Sturgeon is a good bet for future short stories." I repeat that assertion and sincerely hope that I will see more of his work in *Astounding* and Unknown. Isip's picture: O. K.

Dorothy Quick's story was fairly good. The series promises to furnish its quota of entertainment. "Blue and Silver Brocade" is fifth for the issue, but not a poor story. Kirchner's illustration is mediocre.

Last is "Dreams May Come." I did not like this story because it was so dreadfully mixed up, you know, and I was not enough interested in the plot to bother with figuring it out. I wish you would not print stories like these unless they are especially forceful and not quite so tortuous. Wesso is pretty good, but belongs in science-fiction, if anywhere.

Well, it's time again to summarize. Fire Stein. Tell Stuart I'm very regretful of his departure from fantasy writing. Cut down on Isip. Give us more—and more—and more—of the incomparable St. John. Let's see some more by MacCormac, but no more by Gilmore. Theodore Sturgeon is a good bet for short stories in the future. Here's hoping that Dorothy Quick's series pans out well. Can Kirchner and Munn—or rather the type of story that Munn has in the October issue. Send back Wesso to *Astounding*. Incidentally, I take back what I said in my last letter about wanting you to can Wesso. I have since had a change of heart.

In closing, I would like to sling a little brickbat in the direction of Mr. L. Sprague de Camp. I am getting just a little tired of this furious discussion that has been raging in "—And Having Writ—" between the erudite Mr. de Camp and an antagonist about Yoga. At first, I enjoyed this little literary exchange. Mr. de Camp's first letter was amusing, and I got a kick out of it. I was faintly interested in Mr. Hensley's reply. But de Camp's latest letter is carrying the matter too far. If Mr. de Camp wishes to argue the matter with Mr. Hensley, let him address his remarks to Mr. Hensley personally and leave the readers' department to those who wish to discuss Unknown and its policy. Personally, however, I would advise the gentleman in question to abandon his argument and devote the extra time thereby derived to the composition of excellent fantasies such as "The Gnarly Man" and "None But Lucifer."—D. R. Johnson, 3530 Kenwood Avenue, Kansas City, Missouri.

Formula for appreciative attention to your letters: 1. Write. 2. Beef a little, boost a little. 3. Like a story; a letter must win its way in by its entertainment value, too.

ON THE KNEES OF THE GODS

By J. ALLAN DUNN

ON THE KNEES OF THE GODS

by J. ALLAN DUNN

Peter Brent, American, steps through a laurel hedge in modern Greece—and is in the days of the gods! First of a three-part serial.

Illustrated by Isip

PETER BRENT, of Brooklyn, New York, stood upon the left bank of the Eurotas River and looked across the dawn-tinted stream to Sparta. He gazed at the modern city, but in his soul and mind he visioned the ancient one, founded by Lacedaemon, son of Zeus and Taygete, the home of the warrior race that exposed all weakly children to the elements at birth.

Peter was gypsying through Greece, a born rover, with archaeology as his hobby, a song in his heart, and an especial yen for the glory that had once been Greece.

He had vagabonded to Athens on a shoestring, working as understeward on a freighter, going ashore at Peiraeeus, and forgetting to return aboard. He missed little in Athens, either in the relics of its ancient splendor or in certain adventures encountered, because Peter, both by choice and necessity, was not living in hotel luxury, but much closer to the lower order of the town, studying its ways, picking up a smattering of the language.

Of ancient Greek he knew little. His high-school education had been supplemented by Columbia. But his main knowledge of the classics was through translations of Homer. Now he was actually in the land of the Iliad and the Odyssey, and his spirit sang within him.

Peter's "shoestring" was lengthened occasionally by payment for travel articles. He had actually made some discoveries that ranked high for an amateur archaeologist—as he styled himself. There was, or there should be, a check waiting for him at Sparta. He hoped it would be around sixty dollars, but knew it more likely to be forty.

Forty dollars went a long way with a chap who lived frugally. Right now he had about a hundred drachmas, currently supposed to be worth nineteen-odd dollars—gold standard. It was what was left of his pay from the freighter, less the passage charged him by the skipper of the trading felucca, in which he had traveled from Peiraeeus to Gythium—ancient and modern port of Sparta—at the head of the Laconian Gulf.

It was rated twenty-seven miles from Gythium to Sparta. Peter had made it between dawn and twilight, camped on the left bank amid the ruined foundations and potsherds of the original Sparta—the once compact, triangular, fortified city of the Mycenean Period.

He had been tired, but he had rested well, stirred rather than destroyed by his dreams of the Arcadia he meant to visit after he had looked over Sparta and seen the statue of the warrior of the fifth century be-

fore Christ, when Sparta was at the height of its power. The statue had not long been unearthed in the discovery of the theater built around the altar, and before the temple, of Artemis Orthia.

Such things, to Peter, were not museum relics; they were symbols of the Golden Age, imbued with a virility that brought him in actual contact with the days when gods walked with men—media through which he seemed to live in the past so vividly that, at times, he felt certain he had been here before.

Nobody was about. He was hungry and he made his breakfast of cheese and ham and oaten cakes, washed down with light wine that was stimulating and a bit heady.

Peter did not call himself a poet. His verses were unpublished like the tunes he played on the whistle he always carried in his pack. The air he played fitted the words he carried in his head. They made up Peter's philosophy:

I encounter my life as I find it,
Accepting the right with the wrong,
If trouble comes, little I mind it,
But whittle it down with a song.

It was a lively little tune, and the girl who was coming from the vineyard close by with a basket of ripe grapes, paused to listen, and approve, both of the air and the whistler.

PETER was tall and lean and redheaded. His features were not classic, according to the Greek ideal, but they pleased the girl, as they had pleased others before her—and would again.

Calixta, herself, was good to look at—and she knew it—though she was not immodest. She went barefoot, but she was above the rank of peasant.

She was a smart girl, and she picked Peter, first for a foreigner, and then for an American. She had heard talk of Americans from relatives and friends who had other friends and relatives in the United States, which was to Calixta a land of vast wonders and wealth.

This was the first American she had seen in the flesh. She liked him. Peter looked her way and smiled at the picture she made. Calixta smiled back. Youth called to youth, blue eyes met the glance of brown, a bridge was set up between them, on which they met, without speaking.

Until Peter said, in Greek she understood, though she crinkled her nose in mirth at his accent: "Good morning." He caught most of her return greeting. She offered him a bunch of grapes, pointed to his whistle, chattered too fast for him to follow. But he got the idea.

He ate a few of the luscious grapes, cool and sweet. Then he played her a tune. Not one of his own, but a favorite. "Kerry Dance." It made a hit with her. She said so. Peter put a grape between her lips.

She did not swallow it but held up her mouth, and they shared the grape—and the kiss—between them. Peter considered it a most satisfactory combination that had come about quite naturally.

A call came from the vineyard. A small urchin, herding two milch goats, appeared. There was a jeer in his voice that Peter recognized as the international jibe of the "younger brother." The girl flushed redder than the dawn had shown, her eyes snapped.

"That is my brother," she said. "I must go. He talks too much of what he does not understand. Perhaps I shall see you again."

Peter got the gist of what she said.

He knew the Greek word for perhaps, and repeated it.

She went off with the boy, with plenty to say to him. The boy was not backward with teasing retort. They disappeared in the vines and Peter began to pack his duffel, preparatory to crossing the bridge into the city.

Sparta was beginning to awaken. He passed several men on the bridge who looked at him curiously and incuriously. Some of them looked like laborers, some like brigands. There was a certain swank and swagger to their port that made Peter think that Roman rule and Turkish ruin had not yet adulterated or downed the fighting spirit and the pride of the warrior race.

The water of the Eurotas ran swiftly toward the sea. Peter lit a cigarette, leaned upon the parapet, gazing north to Arcadia, land of his dreams, land of the fig and olive, of golden asphodel and sacred laurel groves. Land of Hermes and Artemis, and of Pan!

Pan was Peter's favorite among the old Greek gods. He felt an affinity for him. He and Pan, he thought, in American slang, would have "talked the same language." Pan seemed to have gone along much as Peter did, without worry of the future or care for what might lie at the end of the road.

Farther north, Mount Olympus lifted ten thousand feet above the sea, rock-ribbed and helmeted with snow. Not far away was Thermopylae, where Leonidas and his three hundred Spartans had held off Xerxes and his army of seven thousand. This was the land of heroes, where the gods were not forgotten, where, in some dimension of their own to which in these delinquent days mortals were not admitted, they still lived.

He tossed the butt of the cigarette into the churning current and went on to Sparta.

HERE in the suburbs, the poorer quarter, women looked out of windows or stood in doorways, gossiping before they started their daily tasks. A boy came along leading a mouse-colored donkey that had a strip of blue cloth tied in its halter. Peter knew that meant it was for sale.

A man, lounging outside a tavern, called to the boy who stopped and held the halter rope as the man strode across. The man snatched the rope out of the boy's hand, talking roughly. Peter's knowledge of Greek vernacular did not include many oaths, but he could tell the man was using them.

The boy protested, clinging to the halter with one hand, the other about the donkey's neck. A small crowd began to gather from nowhere, looking on, amused, with no attempt to interfere. Peter joined them.

He did not like the look of the man who had grabbed the rope. He was tall and fierce-looking, with a long scar that sloped back under a black skullcap. He roared at the boy, who stood his ground, fearful but resolute. The man had handlebar mustachios, a mean mouth.

"What is it?" Peter asked the man next to him.

"He claims the boy stole the donkey from him. He is no doubt a liar as well as a drunkard. It is he who wishes to steal the donkey."

Peter felt a tickling of his scalp under the red, crisp hair. The kid was being bullied and bilked. Never long on discretion when roused by any sort of tyranny, Peter forgot he was a stranger in a strange land, and that the crowd, so apathetic

Peter looked down at the howling centaurs. There was no escape from this world till Zeus gave consent—

now about the rights of the youngster, would surely join against the foreigner if he mixed in.

The kid was scared but plucky. He looked at the tall alien with appeal and a glint of hope. Peter mustered up his phrase-book Greek. He had picked up some more from the sailors on the felucca.

"This is your donkey?" he asked.

"It belongs to my mother. I must sell it, for we are poor. There is no food in the house."

"Let go that rope," Peter said to the man, who bellowed at him. The scar went livid. He called Peter something that needed no translation. He tore at the boy's grip on the halter, and when the boy, tears on his grimy but determined face, resisted, he struck him hard with the back of his hand.

Peter went into action, forsaking uncertain words. He hooked the mustachioed Spartan on his unshaven jaw and sent him staggering back, letting go of the rope. Hoarse murmurs came from the crowd. The Spartan snarled, mustachios bristling. He came out of a crouch in a lithe leap, a knife gleaming in his hand.

Peter side-stepped. As the other passed, Peter vised his wrist, forcing his arm back and up, bent at the elbow, twisted it between his shoulder blades in a hammerlock that made the man yell with pain and rage. He was helpless, his arm in danger of being broken. The knife fell to the rough paving of the street and Peter kicked it away.

He let the man's arm go with a shove and kicked him so that he fell sprawling on hands and knees, and Peter kicked him again.

Now he saw the faces all about him, ringing him in, angry. The Spartan got up and flung himself at Peter, arms circling, knee ready to drive into Peter. He was a big man, active as a cat, but a bit flabby.

Peter got inside the arms, put him off balance with a straight left full on the mouth, crossed with his right and knocked him down again. The mob closed in, shoving at him.

A stocky man came pushing through the crowd, talking fast and authoritatively. He stood beside Peter, between him and the Spartan, who was being helped to his feet, his squashed lips dripping blood, spitting out a broken tooth. The stocky man spoke too fast for Peter to more than guess that here was an unexpected champion, with a gift for words, an air of authority.

He had a short beard, well trimmed, a slim mustache. He was wearing an almost sleeveless shirt, drill pants, and sandals. He pointed an imperative finger at the Spartan, then at others he selected, who shrank away from his tirade, slinking off. Finally he settled down to ticking off Peter's adversary, who shrugged his shoulders and walked off, back to the taven, which he entered, three or four following him.

The bearded man spoke to Peter in good American.

"Better clear out of here. Come into the café. You trimmed that skunk, but he's got friends. I know a thing or two about him. Plucky of you, but damn foolish in this end of town."

Peter blew on his knuckles. He had cut them against the Spartan's teeth. He was glad over what he had done but he saw the wisdom of the other's talk, now that his righteous indignation began to cool off.

"Wait a minute," he said. "How much does the kid want for the donkey?"

The other spoke to the boy. "He asks fifty drachmas. It's too much."

Peter counted out half his store,

gave it to the boy, who raced off, voluble with thanks, leaving Peter standing in the middle of the street with the tie rope in his hand, feeling a little foolish.

"What are *you* going to do with it," the other asked.

Peter grinned. "I don't know."

"Might be able to help you out with it. There's a yard back of the café. We can tie it up while we eat."

PETER took coffee while they talked. The name of the stocky man was Burton. He was an artist, commissioned by a Greek owner of a chain of restaurants in New York and other cities to decorate the walls of the cafés with murals.

"I'm here to make the sketches," he said. "Lycurgus is doing well and he is remodeling. He wants the paintings to be of certain views he's chosen, wants 'em right. I'm half Greek myself, on my mother's side. She was born in Sparta. They know me here. That's why they listened to me. That loafer you laid out is a no-good. The police have their eyes on him. Mixed up in smuggling—probably dope. He may try to gang up on you. Where are you staying?"

"Nowhere." Peter went on to tell about himself. Burton was a good egg. He listened attentively.

"If you want to go up into Arcadia," he said, "we might go together. Take along a tent and camp truck—on your donkey. There's a place from which I want to paint Olympus. And there's something up there in your line. A shrine of Hermes, ruined, of course, but the statue of the god is there, fallen, holding a lyre."

"A lyre?" Peter's voice was eager. Almost every statue of Hermes either held the infant Dionysus on one arm, or grasped the staff of office that proclaimed him herald to the gods. This sounded worth while.

A shrine of Hermes, dedicated to him as the inventor of the cithara, the seven-stringed lyre made from the shell of a tortoise, was something to write home about. More than that, Peter wanted to see it for himself, for something within him tugged.

"That suits me fine," he said. "When would you start?"

"Tomorrow, if it's all right with you. We'll get our stuff together today. We'll camp out, but we can get supplies here and there as we go along. You don't mind walking? Takes longer."

"I'm a born tramp, and I love to camp," Peter told him.

"I've my rooms upstairs. Let's go up. You'll stay here with me tonight—and stay indoors after dark. That smuggler, Tatanis, might be hanging round with some of his pals. Knives in the dark are hard to dodge."

Peter said: "I've got to go to the post office."

"Then I'll go with you. And we can buy what we want to take along."

There was no mail for Peter at the Poste Restante. It did not bother him. It would be there when they got back. Should be, anyway. His only fear was that he could not hold up his share of the camping trip's expense.

"I have the tent. You've furnished the donkey," Burton said. "We won't have to spend more than a few dollars apiece. What shall we call the jackass? What's its name?"

"The jackass! Oh, call it Ajax." Peter was primed with good will, looking forward to the jaunt, the shrine of Hermes.

Back in Burton's rooms over the café, Peter smoked while he watched the artist going over canvases, preparing his kit. Peter did not consider himself an art critic, but he saw that Burton could paint with excellent color, drawing and fidelity.

They had the noon meal together, the food good, the owner of the place more than friendly to Peter when he heard of the trip. He toasted them in Greek absinthe he produced for the occasion. It seemed that Peter's encounter with the smuggling Tatanis was the talk of the quarter.

The owner tapped Peter on the chest impressively. "Make an early start—do not go out after dark, my friend. This Tatanis is a brigand. To do this"—he swept his finger across his throat—"he would think nothing."

Peter laughed. He did not expect to let Tatanis dictate his movements. The greatest stretch of his imagination did not reach to the event that was to spur their departure.

THAT happened after supper. Like all cafés in Sparta, the place was as much club as restaurant. Men sat about and talked politics and war, sipping absinthe or coffee, smoking until the room was pokey.

Burton and Peter, with the owner and a crony of the latter—some vague relative of Burton's mother—were in a corner, facing the door when a small boy looked in. Peter vaguely thought he had seen him before but did not place him until the boy pointed directly at him. That prompted his memory. It was the boy with the two goats, the brother of the girl who had given him the grapes.

Even then he had no idea of what was in the wind.

It all proceeded with a sort of ceremony that was pompous, ridiculous, but clearly in earnest. One elderly man, bald, flanked by two younger ones with their black hair slicked back like polished leather, ranged themselves solemnly in front of the table, bowed and then stiffened.

They were all dressed in blue serge, they had yellow shoes with pointed toes, and red neckties. Two had mustaches they stroked with an air that Peter thought they fancied arrogant, fixing their eyes upon him.

The bald man made him an harangue of which Peter understood less than a quarter.

"If he's talking to me," he said to Burton, "you'd better act as interpreter. Does Tatanis want to fight a duel?"

"It's worse than that. At least I'd think so. He says that you can speak Greek, Peter—enough, it appears, to have compromised his daughter—"

"To have *what?*"

"Tell me your end of it later. He is here to demand that you marry the girl, Calixta. He regrets that he cannot give her much dowry save her beauty and her virtue—which he hints you have cast a slight upon—but he feels that you, as an American, and therefore a man of wealth, will not mind that. He honestly believes you've got plenty of money, Peter, or that you have a family that can supply it. Just what *did* happen?"

Peter and Burton, with their swift American talk, were as much aloof from the crowd as if they had been apart—and Peter was glad of it. He wanted to laugh, but he saw that all the rest in the room were taking the matter very seriously. Burton had a twinkle growing in his eyes as he listened.

"Don't try to leave now," Pan grinned. "He's noticed you—it wouldn't be safe."

"Didn't you know that to share a grape, with its wine juice, like that, is practically a betrothal, Peter. Custom of the country, at least in these parts. And when *you* did it, the fair Calixta naturally thought you meant it."

"I don't believe she thinks anything of the kind. It it just happened naturally—"

"Such things do," said Burton dryly.

"It was that brat of a brother of hers who spilled it. What do I do now? I'm not going to marry her,

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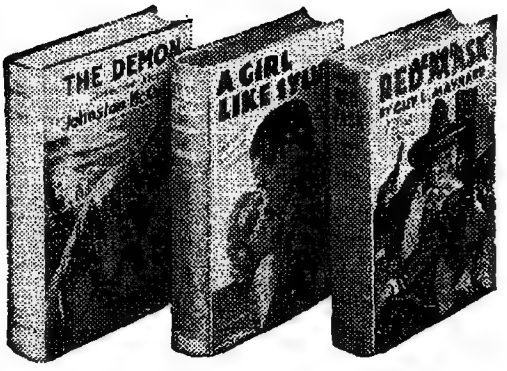
Great Christmas Gift Reduction



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or any other girl. Hang it all, Burton, she's a sweet kid, but—"

Burton winked at him. "Keep your shirt on. I shall tell them that you will consider the matter, especially the lack of dowry. And they shall come for their answer at this time tomorrow. I will tell the straight of it to the owner. He will explain that you are miserably poor. When you come back you can make her—or them—a gift. In the meantime an early start is indicated."

AT DAWN, Burton, Peter, and Ajax, the jackass, were well into the hills.

"It's your red hair, Peter. Do you often get into scrapes like that?"

Peter reddened. He knew Burton was kidding. There had been other girls, there would probably be more. Peter's private creed was a belief in getting all he could out of life—without harming anybody.

"She isn't really compromised, is she?" he asked.

"Not a bit. Her old man thought you might have some money. Her elder brothers were being dramatic. You were just a bit too much of a public figure for the time being. Now you retire into private life—"

"I hope," grinned Peter, unable to read the future, save in certain hunches, that did not serve him now.

"All will be forgiven and forgotten," Burton said. "How's for breakfast?"

They had left too early for anything but a cup of coffee laced with absinthe. Their appetites were mounting. They ate heartily while Ajax grazed and larks sang above them.

Peter leaned back against a rock and took out his whistle.

"Good tune, that," said Burton. "I've heard it before. What is it?"

Peter sang a few words in a husky but true and tuneful baritone:

"Oh the days of the Kerry dancin',
Oh the croon of the piper's tune.
Oh the sheen of the bright eyes glancin'—"

"Irish, are you?" asked Brent.

"On my mother's side."

"That accounts for it." Burton did not particularize. He lit his pipe and Peter a cigarette as they got to their feet, bound for Arcadia.

II.

THE green-and-gold-enameled head of a lizard thrust itself out from a crevice of the ancient, crumbled shrine. Its bright eyes glittered. It leered out a flickering tongue at Peter before it raced with flirting tail to the mutilated statue of Hermes that lay prone in the long grass and leafy herbage.

Peter had a curious feeling that he had been in this spot before. The lizard seemed to wink at him as if they shared a secret. And Peter sensed some sort of vague kinship with the cheeky little saurian. In them both flowed the mysteries of life and time. Their beginnings, after all, were not so very far apart.

He regarded the fallen statue with something stirring within him, like water in a spring. It was not hard for him to imagine that Zeus still held court of high Olympus, that Pan might be rousing from his noonday siesta in some nearby thicket.

He heard, or thought he heard, faint music, infinitely sweet and mellow.

You have been here before, Peter. Don't you remember?

He tried to remember, to answer the prompting of the inner voice. The air was sweet with the balm of

basil and bay. Time seemed to stand still. What *was* Time?—he asked himself. A man-made term—

Creeping shadows slowly shifted, sunshine gilded the rim of the crevice where the lizard had appeared. It was still watching him from the shoulder of Hermes. It seemed to regard him cynically, almost as if it pitied him for his denseness, his inability to understand something the lizard was trying to get across to him—as if the lizard were the guardian spirit of the shrine.

Then, as the sunshine dropped deeper into the crevice, he saw something gleaming there, creamy-white, polished—like the process of a bone, a knuckle, or it might be marble.

Peter took the pocket flash, that was part of his equipment in his research prowlings, and switched it on. It had a powerful, adjustable lens, triple batteries that were practically new. The white ray dived deeper than the sunbeam. The object was not a bone.

He fished his hand carefully into the narrow rift and brought out the ivory carving of a horse. It was about seven inches in height, almost as long. The body was merely a cylinder, the rest of it amazingly modernistic. It would have been hailed as very "neo" by the surrealists. Peter knew it was all of twenty-five hundred years old, more likely twenty-seven.

It had been placed upon this shrine of Hermes as an offering by someone craving the favor of the Ready Helper. Back in the days when Homer smote his lyre and told of deeds by land and sea.

Hermes had toppled, the altar of the shrine had weathered, cracked. This little ivory hippos had fallen into the crack.

And Peter, standing there, gazing at it, was smitten with the thought —or was it a memory?—that it was he who had once placed it there.

It was evasive, that memory, evasive as the tie-up with the fluty music that came again, blithe and uplifting.

Remembrance failed to click. Peter forgot the music as he took a camel's-hair brush from his pocket and delicately, tenderly dusted off the ivory figurine. It might, he thought, have been made in Sparta, Crete, or Delos. Someone had seen it displayed on a stand in the agora and bought it for an offering.

It might have been he. It seemed a talisman, but the vibrations that made it part of past and present did not erect any bridge upon which Peter's memory could cross.

It's a shame I can't rub you, like Aladdin and his lamp, and get transported back to those days, little horse! So Peter apostrophized the hippos as it lay in the palm of his hand. He did not speak aloud.

To get back to the glory that was Greece. That was the age in which to live, little horse. Not these days of war and greed, of the destruction of cities, of wanton slaughter. That was the age—the Golden Age—of women and fair combat, of wine and song, of love and bold adventure.

He thought of gracious gods and goddesses who held the affairs of men upon their knees, like playthings. He remembered lines from Byron. In general he thought Byron a bit sappy, but the poet had lived in and loved this land.

The isles of Greece, the isles of Greece!
Where burning Sappho loved and sung,
Where grew the arts of war and peace—
Where Delos rose, and Phoebus sprung!

There came a sudden flourish of the haunting music close by. A hearty voice said:

"Well thought, mortal. Well thought, indeed!"

Thought? Peter had said nothing aloud. Who—what—had read his thoughts?

He hadn't seen the laurel hedge before. Now he saw it was of great height and density; it had evidently been planted—rather than grown naturally—a long, long time ago, though its glossy leaves and twining boughs had been kept clipped. He couldn't see over or through it.

"Who is there?" he asked. The voice broke into jocund laughter.

"If you would know, if you will seek without fear, and with belief—come through the laurel."

"I have no fear, I do believe." Peter was not sure whether he made this credo to himself, or to the Voice, whose owner claimed to read his thoughts.

The thick growth began to shrink upon itself, left and right, until there was revealed a bowery archway, just high enough and wide enough to admit him—a short tunnel of laurel, the mystic, sacred shrub, symbol of protection and purification.

Beyond the archway there shone a rosy radiance, like that of dawn. Peter put the brush, the light and the ivory horse in his pockets.

He went *through the laurel.*

As he went the laurel rustled back like a folding screen, impenetrable.

And there was Pan—in person!

PAN sat on a rock the elements had rudely fashioned to a throne, padded with deep mosses. The god was at his ease, hospitable. His bronzed, muscular torso was draped with a fine sheepskin about his loins,

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blending with the shagginess of his goatish legs and hoofs. His ears were sharp, his horns curved above them, flat to his head.

He was bearded like the chief of all the satyrs that he was. His eyes were yellow iris, large and intensely black of pupil. A god who liked his roguery, fond of his nectar, his ambrosia, and his amours. Kindly and not unhandsome, with a winning smile as he bade Peter be seated.

Peter took the stone that was pointed out. He was not feeling awed. More as if Pan and he were old acquaintances.

"Your name, mortal?"

"Peter Brent." Peter reflected that it would be Petros in Greek, but he did not know if they were speaking Greek or not. Certainly they understood each other. It must be Pan, speaking good English. Naturally the gods understood all mortal languages. He let it go at that.

"I heard your apostrophe, Peter. I cannot say I admired the verse so greatly. The meter lacked the swing of Homer. But the thought was there, and the wish. There are fairer isles than Delos. As for Sappho of Lesbos, to me, she writes jerkily and of foolish matters. But the word 'burning' strikes the mark. As for selecting Phoebus, my mighty uncle has too many names. He lets those nine wenches who style themselves the Muses trail him around. He thinks he is the only one who ever made music. Did he not flay Marsyas alive for presuming to compete with him? I, Pan, am a far better musician than Apollo, even as is my father, Hermes."

Pan picked up his pipes.

"I heard you playing just now, I think," said Peter. "Upon your pipes."

"My pipes? 'Tis true they are reeds, plucked where Syrinx, the coy nymph, called to the gods for help, fleeing from my arms, who would have honored her. It was a rare joke on Syrinx. They took her at her word and changed her to a reed. I have been told that the music I thus make is sweeter than that of the lyre of my uncle, Phoebus-Apollo."

"I am sure it is," said Peter politely.

"I call this after her, Syrinx." Pan held out the instrument.

"In my country they call it Pan-pipes," Peter said.

"They *do?* Now, by my sheep-hook, that sounds well! So, I am not forgotten? The great Pan is *not* dead."

"That tune you were playing just now. That also is immortal. It is a great favorite with us." Peter had just remembered the name of the melody. "No doubt it is your composition?"

"Without doubt. Aeolus, or his four airy children, sometimes give me inspiration, as they fly to do the bidding of the gods. I hear them in the rustling of the reeds, the leaves. I am composing a tune to Pitys, a dryad who lives in a pine tree. When the air is completed I shall play it to her and she will come out of the tree. But you say you know the tune I just now played. Let me hear it."

PETER took out his whistle and played the tune with gusto. It all came back to him. It was merely the strangeness of the surroundings that had thrown him off at first. For the tune that was immortal was also known to modern mortals as "The Kerry Dance." Peter gave it a sprightly rendition while Pan looked first amazed, then delighted.

"It is true that the tune is a good one," said the goat god complacently. "No wonder it has lasted. It has not been changed a note. Can't you see the reeds shaking and dancing in the wind? You have a good ear."

The god stood up, inflating his muscular chest. He set the syrinx to his bearded lips and breathed across the reeds, not blowing into them.

The result was pure genius, inspiration derived from the natural harmonies of the terrestrial sphere. The croon of wind, the patter of rain, flow of water, bird calls; blended into perfect rendition.

Pan piped like a true artist, oblivious to all but his music. Peter found the masterpiece vaguely familiar also. Gradually he identified the interwoven theme as identical with that of Debussy's "Afternoon of a Faun."

Who gets the real credit?—he asked himself. Were such melodies public domain these days? Had Debussy's kin genius picked it out of the cycled ether through which it vibrated eternally, in accord with Einstein's theory of the bent rays, that made all time relative?

Pan, intent upon his playing, was not reading Peter's thoughts. The trend of them was confusing. It suggested that both Pan and Peter might be existent simultaneously. Peter felt they had much in common. He slid off into mental chaos, speculating whether their meeting—even the combination of the names, Peter and Pan, of Peter Pan—was more than a coincidence. Providing anything was as it now seemed.

This gave him a headache, and he dismissed the problem, praising the masterpiece with sincerity.

"Why did you invite me through the laurel?" he asked.

Pan stretched himself at length, scratching the back of an ear with a hoof. He looked at Peter whimsically.

"Why did you come to Peloponessus?" he countered.

"I was born with what we call a roving foot, I suppose."

"And I with a roving hoof. I remember, when I was much younger, a mere kid, so to speak, I wandered far. You and I have much in common, I think. Your dress is strange to me. Doubtless you come from a far-off land. Tell me, is there war or peace with you?"

"Peace at present, great Pan." Peter saw the adjective was acceptable. "That is in my own country. But there is war among others. And we never know when we may get mixed up in trouble ourselves. There is always war going on some place."

"There must be. Otherwise, you mortals would become too numerous to exist. Tell me of the trouble that is brewing. Are men good fighters nowadays? Do they have strange machines? Our Greeks and Romans were mighty warriors, but their weapons were simple."

"Save for the Trojan horse," said Peter, and saw he had scored. "With us there are now two men, one a Goth, the other a Roman, who esteem themselves highly, and who use strange devices, such as poison gas—"

"A foul way to fight, to my mind."

"Both of these men seem to be somewhat mad, Pan."

"Ha! 'Those whom the gods would destroy they first make mad!' You seem well informed for a stripling and a mortal. They tell me you have learned the art of Daedalus, and made machines in which to fly. I have seen such machines in the sky. Sometimes Zeuz brings

them down when he is in the mood for flinging thunderbolts. For myself, I do not bother with these matters. They are on the knees of the high gods, and while it is true that I am in high favor upon Olympus, I am but a demigod at best."

His humility was plainly assumed. Peter sought for a fitting response, but Pan spared him.

"It will be well if you appear before Zeus before he thinks of you. He is, of course, aware of your arrival, knowing all things, but you may not have entered actively into his thoughts. He is, I fear, somewhat distraught at present with a" —Pan grinned and winked—"a temporary domestic disturbance."

I hope, thought Peter, Zeus does not chuck a thunderbolt at me, just to keep his hand in.

Then he realized he had to be careful about his thinking. It was plain that Pan could read his mind.

"Have no fear, Peter. I myself will present you, and speak well of you. He will, of course, set you a task."

Peter felt his lower jaw sag. "A task?"

"It is his custom. It has always been his custom to set tasks to test both immortals and mortals. All mortals are the playthings of the gods but, if you acquit yourself well, you will be rewarded. Otherwise—"

"Otherwise?" Peter did not like the "otherwise."

"No doubt you will die. I trust a swift death and an easy one. The punishment of mortals is brief. It may be that I shall be able to aid you, though not too openly, nor too much. I have taken a fancy to you, Peter."

"Thanks, great Pan."

One paid a price for going *through the laurel*. Peter hoped it would be worth the cost of admission, and that the cost would not be too dear. He wondered how he was going to get to Olympus. Transportation methods were likely to be novel, to say the least of it.

Pan considered him with a little frown puckering between his horns.

"I am weighing the proper dose," he said. "Nectar and ambrosia are drink and food to the gods. If Zeus chooses to give them to you, and thus bestow immortality, that is his privilege. There have been times when even I, the great god Pan, have wished I were mortal. But it will be necessary for you to partake of small quantities, and even I would not dare to usurp the privilege of Zeus.

"They are potent. When Themis, the mother of my uncle, Apollo—who also styles himself Phoebus and Helios—gave him his first taste of them, he burst his swaddling clothes and stood up full-grown, already demanding his lyre and bow. I must be careful with you. It will be in the nature of an experiment." The god frowned more deeply, went into a deep study, scratching his fleecy flank.

"I have it," he said at last. "I shall anoint you with ambrosia, rather than let you eat it. A mere lap of nectar will be sufficient, I hope."

From back of his rocky chair Pan brought a chalice of bright metal, on which a design of grapes and vine leaves and tendrils was chased in high relief. Next an urn with a lid, and two handles representing dolphins. Then a jar, on which fauns and nymphs were dancing, painted on what seemed opaque glass. He held up the urn.

"A gift to me, from Amphitrite, wife to Poseidon," he said with a smirk that brought to Peter's mind

tales of the love life of the gods, with Zeus the past master of such affairs. "We are good friends," Pan went on. "It may be that that will help in the task Zeus sets you. One never knows when a woman will come in useful. Have you much acquaintance with women, Peter?"

"I've never made a habit of it." Peter remembered Calixta. "I roam too much, I suppose. I've had my fun and try not to give anybody the worst of it. We have a saying that a sailor has a girl in every port—"

"Good! I must tell Odysseus."

"I don't take them too seriously," Peter went on. "I'm not ready to choose one and settle down. Most of them are either too frivolous or too much the other way. I suppose I'll get tied up some day. But I'm in no hurry to be moored to any woman's apron strings."

"That is an apt expression. But if one *must* wed, it may well be wiser to have only one. True, the consorts of Zeus do not all have the jealousy of Hera, who esteems herself the first of them. His dalliance with earth brides are of slight consequence to them. For myself, I love and leave. Once in a while one gets away from me. That may be a blessing in disguise." He picked up his syrinx, sighed and set it down.

Carefully he poured out his idea of a "lap" of nectar. "This will tinge your mortal blood with ichor, Peter. Don't let it go to your head."

Peter took the chalice, downed the sup of golden liquid.

Instantly he seemed to lose all sense of gravity. It was as if he soared high in the ether, while his veins throbbed with ecstasy. A myriad suns appeared to revolve about him in a celestial saraband. There was the mighty strain of some Aeolian organ pealing through space. Slowly the glory died down. He was on the ground once more, tingling with vigor in body, mind and spirit.

Pan was looking anxious but suddenly grinned. "I was afraid I might have overdone it, Peter. Now for the unguent. Take off your clothing."

He opened the box, and a fragrance that was nothing but divine stole upon Peter's senses, drugging him so that he was barely conscious of Pan commencing to anoint him. The rosy glow faded out. He sank into a blissful oblivion.

III.

Peter roused as Pan shook him by the shoulder. He looked up and saw the steady, golden stars in a sky of purple, soft as velvet. Pan's breath came to him, laden with the fumes of wine.

Peter sat up and looked about him. They were in a tiny alpine valley—a green-bottomed cup of the mountains. Its sides reared up to great masses of granite, high scarps and frowning buttresses, soaring cliffs that were riven and pitted.

Steep slopes were clothed with trees in serried ranks. There were canyons and chasms, overhanging walls of twisted strata, rough and uneven.

He lifted his eyes to the glory of a dazzling crest. Light seemed to come through the crystal cape of snow that ermined the high shoulders of Olympus. All about it luminous mists trailed in strange shapes, that now and then seemed to hold definite form and then dissolved again in glinting vapors.

There was one majestic, brooding shape that appeared to be seated upon the very summit of the sacred mount. It blotted out the stars,

cosmic. Every little while lightning fulminated behind the mysterious bulk, livid flares of levin, through which shot forked javelins of dazzling flame, while thunder boomed and rolled like the discharge of celestial artillery.

Peter got to his feet, awed and fearful. The air seemed dynamic, the great rocks pulsing with the power that emanated from the dread figure that must be Zeus.

"How big *is* he?" he asked Pan.

Pan chuckled. The sound was comforting. Again Peter caught the heavy fragrance of wine, of crushed grapes. Pan had been imbibing something beside nectar. He hiccuped slightly as he answered.

"Just as big as you *think* he is, Peter. As big as your courage."

Now, as Peter gazed, his eyes seemed to gain a better focus. He felt the strength of the lap of nectar still sustaining him. Now the luminous, swirling shapes took plainer form, the figures of women clad in iridescent robes.

His will seemed turning the screw that adjusted the lenses of powerful binoculars. The form of Zeus compacted, lessened. The lightning paled, the flaming javelins ceased their jagged radiation.

He saw Zeus. Pan laid a hand on Peter's shoulder.

"He is peevish," said Pan, "but the mood passes."

A wind rushed down the mountain like the expulsion of a mighty breath. The dark woods bowed before it and it passed on. An eagle came out of the starry void and circled above the oak-crowned head of the overlord of Olympus—Zeus the Thunderer.

He looked to Peter like Michael Angelo's statue of Moses, come to life. His hair was long and curly, so was the beard he plucked as he gave a sidelong glance at the nearest of the female figures, standing with folded arms, her face beautiful but severe, her black brows frowning.

Zeus was majestic, but into Peter's head there came the thought that he was uneasy, as if he might be a henpecked monarch, fearful of his consort's displeasure. For all his stately port there seemed at this moment something of the small boy about him, a child that sulked—a pout behind the curving mustache.

Pan's fingers closed on his shoulder. Pan chuckled again. Peter realized that his thoughts had been read again. He had to be careful, to set a guard on them. This time it was all right. Pan was not offended.

"You are right, Peter, but be careful. Hera is in a sour mood. I fear me Zeus has been playing truant. He has shown his fiery temper and now he is cooling down, knowing he is in the wrong. Now he will be thinking how to appease Hera. After all he has to live with her."

"Don't you think it would be better if I came back some other time, great Pan?"

"You might not get far. Zeus could bring you down with a thunderbolt quicker than he did Phaethon when he tried to drive the chariot of Phoebus. There would be nothing left of you but a cinder, Peter, perhaps not that. He knows we are here. To leave would make you an excuse, a target, for his anger to vent itself upon. Fear not, I will mediate for thee, Peter."

Peter trusted Pan was a good mediator. But he was in for it. He wished he had another lap of nectar. Here was adventure indeed.

A SHINING being leaped into the air from beside the throne of Zeus. It wore winged sandals, a wide-

rimmed hat, also winged, and bore a staff wreathed with serpents. Peter knew it must be Hermes. He was naked save for a narrow girdle. He landed on the rimrock of a cliff that towered above the little dell.

"Who comes to high Olympus? What mortal approaches?"

"It is my honored parent," Pan said. "He knows I'm with you, but he likes to go through the forms and ceremonies. Stay where you are."

Pan lifted his syrinx and breathed a flourish through the reeds.

"It is I, Pan, thy son. I come."

Peter stayed where he was very willingly. He had no desire to get closer to Zeus or Hera, who probably thought less of the life of a mortal than Peter would of that of an ant.

He was a bit worried about Pan. Pan might not be drunk, but he had a bit more than he could handle.

He lurched as he started away, playing on his pipes. His wind was good. Peter saw him go in prodigious leaps, bounding among the crags, making his way to where the herald of the gods awaited him.

Peter began to feel the glow of the nectar dying down. Again the shapes lost definite outline, the form of Zeus became amorphous.

Peter felt hungry. He began to wonder what he would do for nourishment, in this bourn where nectar and ambrosia fed the gods but were, save in Pan's laps - and unguent, denied him.

It grew cold and he huddled up, wishing with all his heart for a cigarette. He remembered leaving his tobacco pouch and papers on the broken slab of the altar beside his lunch box. He remembered with a pang that he had not eaten all that

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lunch. Now it was all on the *far side of the laurel.*

How he had got to Olympus he could not tell. Perhaps Pan had transported him, perhaps the ambrosial ointment had given him some power of levitation. It did not matter. Nothing mattered very much at the moment, except the craving for a cigarette that swamped everything else as he dwelled upon it.

With faint hope, that proved fruitless, he felt through his pockets for a fag, for half a one, for some crumbs of tobacco. He found keys, money, the camel's-hair brush, the flashlight and—bitter irony—his cigarette lighter.

It was the friction type, in a closed tube, with plenty of fuse, useful for exploration trips. Peter took off the cap and snapped the wheel against the flint, blowing gently. A flame that seemed pretty feeble on Olympus, responded. He put it away, felt the little ivory horse.

His stomach was shrunken, his belly getting flat. And he was getting sleepy again. If he dropped off he could forget his hunger for tobacco and a meal. He might wake up and find it all a dream.

But he could not remember having gone to sleep on the *other side of the laurel.*

THEY were back again, by Pan's stone chair. Peter yawned, stretched, opened his eyes to the ambient air, roseate as if he saw through tinted glasses.

Pan was on his back, snoring. It did not seem godlike, but it did make Pan more companionable, almost human.

A bronze beetle ran across Pan's hairy chest, over his beard, tickled his nose. Great Pan sneezed, rose, rubbing his knuckles into his eyes.

"My mouth tastes as if a toad had slept there," he exclaimed.

He reached down and produced the urn and the chalice, poured some of the golden liquor.

He looked doubtfully at Peter. "A lap of nectar, Peter? You look wan."

"I think not, great Pan. It is powerful stuff—and, on an empty stomach—"

Peter wanted to know what Zeus had said, but most of all he had to eat. He let his thoughts rove freely on that idea as Pan slapped his thigh.

"Ha! I had forgot you were but mortal. Would ripe olives and figs stay you?"

"I do not see any," said Peter.

"Ha!" Pan swigged off the nectar, set down the chalice. He sat hunched on the stone and scratched his elbow with his hoof.

"Now, this is magic, Peter," he said. "I will tell you the secret. You have only to think hard enough, to wish hard enough, for anything. To concentrate long enough—and *it is.* Think of figs, ripe figs, Peter. I will help you. Gaze on that bush."

It was an ilex, a species of holly, with prickly leaves. It did not seem likely to bear figs, any more than a thistle might.

"Think—of *figs.*"

Pan's face was set. It was evident he was putting out a tremendous effort. And Peter thought about figs until he was dizzy. Pan clapped his hands.

"Pluck, and eat, Peter."

It was no longer an ilex. It was a fig tree. The purple fruit grew thickly, ripe, odorous. They were real figs. Peter bit into the sweet, pink pulp with gusto. Pan did not join him but grinned.

"I am not very good at this materializing," Pan confessed. "It

takes much practice and it is hard for me to think long of one thing. And when you stop the thought, the spell is broken. While you ate, you *knew* those were figs, but I did not, because to me the fig tree is now an ilex once again."

Peter nodded, eating his last fig. The thread had been broken for him also, and the ilex showed its glossy, prickly leaves and small white blossoms. It had seemed very simple magic, but it had worked.

"Zeus is wonderful," Pan said. "He can think of many things at once, but sometimes even he nods, and loses interest, and things get mixed."

Peter could imagine that. Zeus playing with magic, amused with the way it worked out, until he grew weary, and then the things he had started fell apart, incomplete, like the scraps of a jigsaw puzzle fallen from his lap. The caprices of the gods were too often the disasters of men. That was borne in upon him as Pan went on:

"Now I will tell you of the task Zeus has set you. It is but a small affair to the labors of Heracles—"

The labors of Heracles! Peter groped in his memory of Greek mythology, trying to recall those labors. There had been ten of them, and two had been thrown out to be done over. Cleaning the Augean stables, slaying and taming wild beasts and monsters, stealing golden apples from the Garden of the Hesperides, bringing back three-headed Cerberus from Hades—

"I see what you are thinking about," Pan told him. "Your task is comparatively simple. This is it:

"PYTHON, the serpent, who lives near Delphi, has hidden because of the threat of Phoebus-Apollo and his sister, my aunt, Artemis, to destroy him. My brilliant uncle claims that Python annoyed Leto, his mother, when she was carrying him and Artemis, who was born one day ahead of Apollo. But I think that Apollo wishes to show off, or perhaps Artemis desires the same thing that Hera has asked from Zeus to patch up this present quarrel.

"For myself, I have never liked serpents," Pan continued, "and Python is very wily. Especially is he versed in the ways of mortals. He has lived in gloomy caverns for so long that his sight is poor, and he carries in his mouth a great jewel. This he lets roll upon the ground as a lantern when he wishes to see plainly. It is this gem, Peter, that you must obtain, as the first part of your task."

The *first* part—there was a catch in it, just as with Heracles.

"Python is a large serpent?" Peter hazarded.

"I would not say how many fathoms make up his length, Peter. It is said that he devours three oxen at one meal. You must match your wits against his. If you can catch him asleep, or drowsy after eating, it would be well."

Peter did not too much like the "if" part of it. He visioned deep, dank caverns through which Python dragged or coiled his scaly fathoms, nosing the glowing jewel before him, seeking his prey, to throw his frightful coils about it, reduce it to a pulp, slick it with saliva, and then—

"This was Hera's idea," Pan explained. "If you obtain the jewel for Zeus, and Zeus gives it to her, she will forgive him. Or, says she will. She would do that eventually, in any case, whether you return or not, of course."

"Of course," Peter said. "Go on."

"Good lad!" Pan slapped him on the back. "Now this is somewhat

confidential, Peter. When the others heard of the jewel, Leto thrust her oar into the galley. She demanded that, since you were going to find Python, you should bring back Ephryne, the daughter of Artemis, whom Python has captured and is holding as hostage for his own safety."

"The daughter of Artemis? I thought that she— Didn't she kill Actaeon for merely looking at her when she was in bathing?"

Pan winked, chuckled. "Perhaps it was less because he *looked*, than because of his *looks*, Peter, that did not appeal to her. It may be true that she found Ephryne, abandoned in the reeds by the river, and adopted the child. Who knows? Such tales have been spread elsewhere and believed. It may all be rumor. Of course there *have* been rumors that Artemis was quite fond of Orion. These matters are gossip, and confidential, as I have said. The point is for you to rescue the maid."

"What about Apollo?" Peter asked.

"He is away on his yearly trip to the hyperborean regions. Python may be off guard. Or he may not, because of Artemis. But, if you succeed, Zeus will reward you greatly. Buck up, lad, you have only to find Python, and then devise a plan to secure the gem and release the maiden. She also may be grateful."

"I am no Heracles," Peter demurred. "He killed two snakes in his cradle. And was he not a god?"

"There was some trouble at the time of his birth between Hera and Zeus, concerning Alcmene, the mother of Heracles, the wife of Amphitryon."

"At any rate he would be better at handling Python. I suppose I can't get out of this, great Pan?"

Pan scratched himself back of one horn.

"I'm afraid not, Peter. After all, you *did* come *through the laurel*."

"You asked me."

"I know I did. And I am willing to help you. I feel sure that Cheiron can direct you— No, Peter, you are thinking of the wrong person. This is not Charon, the ferryman of the Styx, but Cheiron, chief of the centaurs."

Peter felt slightly relieved.

"Of course the centaurs are a rough, wild lot. They are always out on a foray with their double-headed broadaxes, or with limbs of trees, for those who do not possess an ax. They are apt to slay a stranger first and inquire about him afterward, if they bother to remember him. But Cheiron, their chief, is kind and very wise. Kings and heroes send their sons to him to be educated and trained in the manly arts. Heracles was his pupil, also Jason, favorite of Hera, who brought back the Golden Fleece from Colchis. And Jason was a mortal."

"I'm neither king's son or a favorite of Hera, great Pan. How do I find Cheiron?" asked Peter.

"I will set you down on the Erymanthian ridge, Peter. That is where the centaurs dwell. It may be that they are busy raiding the Lapithae, with whom they are always at war, and you will get through them to Cheiron's cave. I will show you where it lies. I cannot take you there. I had a slight misunderstanding with the old gentleman. Once, long ago, the hoofs of the hippos were like mine, split. Now they are single. The centaur being half hippo and half man. I was a little graped at the time, and I made some jest to Cheiron, lamenting that his feet were so clumsy,

compared to those of satyrs. He took it amiss. I have heard he still bears the grudge."

Pan dug into his hairy ear for something that annoyed him, inspected it and threw it away. It went of its own slow motion. Peter saw it was a wood tick.

"But because of this difference, Peter, I can give you one thing that may stand you in good stead with the centaurs, and with Cheiron. I will give you a salve that is a sure cure for sore frogs."

Pan burst out laughing at the look in Peter's face.

"I mean the soft part of the hoof of a centaur that makes his foot inferior to mine—" Pan stretched out his legs and proudly surveyed his polished hoofs. "The frogs bruise from stones and they go lame. I have no such trouble. And this salve will ease and cure them. They will surely be favorable to you, if you can get them to listen."

There were getting to be entirely too many "ifs" about this task he could not get out of. First it had been Python and Ephryne, now there were centaurs. And this was but the entry to what Peter felt was going to be an unknown and precarious trail. But it gripped him. There was adventure in his blood, harking down, perhaps from some Viking forebear. Excitement, the pitting of his wits against largely

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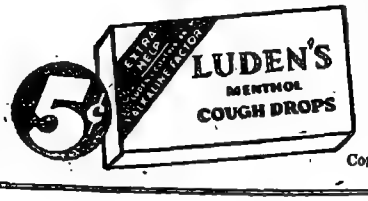

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unknown odds. A man—a mortal—lived once, died once. Love of life was all right, if one really lived while life lasted. Here was a challenge, a chance to prove himself to himself. Peter accepted it.

"The centaurs—Cheiron—are they vegetarians?" he asked.

"Always thinking of your belly." Pan laughed until his own quivered. "If Cheiron takes you as guest, he will feed you well with meat and fruit and wine."

There was still another of those *ifs*.

Pan got up, stretching. The odor of wine blended with the musky smell of goat. There was no doubt that Pan had B. O. Peter fancied that might have had something to do with why Syrinx ran from him and Pytis stayed inside her pine tree.

Then he noticed, for the first time, that Pan cast no shadow. He felt a little delicate about mentioning it. He did not want to get in wrong with Pan, his only friend in Peloponessus. As usual, when Pan was near him, words were not needed.

"That, Peter, is because we gods have ichor in our veins, not blood, as with mortals. There is a true saying—'false gods shun the sun.' That is how you may surely tell mortals from immortals, Peter. Gods cast no shadows. I will fetch the salve. Then you shall have a lap of nectar, and I will anoint you with ambrosia."

He turned away. Peter watched his shadeless figure as it leaped a fallen log like a deer.

Peter muttered beneath his breath. "Gods have no shadows, huh? Neither have ghosts. They technically call you a shade when Hermes personally conducts a one-way tour to Hades, via Charon's ferry. I'm glad it's Cheiron I'm seeing *this* trip. It's a good thing I was brought up with horses. I may

managed to get along with the centaurs."

IV.

PETER BRENT was on his own. Pan had departed after giving him a present and a warning—apart from the salve that was for sore frogs.

The present was a single-mouthed, double-tubed shepherd's pipe, on which Peter was to practice.

The warning was emphatic.

"Remember, Peter my lad, that you must not set your will against the will of Zeus. That will be instantly detected. If you persist you will be punished. You may be warned first. It depends upon the mood of Zeus at the time he receives the impulse, that will come to him as the slightest tap upon a drumhead transmits its impact. I tell you this, lest you be tempted to give up this quest and leave the pale of Olympus."

It was a cursedly awkward thing, Pan reading his thoughts this way. It was almost impossible to control them. Pete looked forward, in that way, to being alone.

One thing was very plain, that Pan did not care for the company of centaurs. As a god, they could not do much more than annoy Pan, Peter thought. But he had offended their chief. They might tease him, as small boys bait a superior, and Pan did not like to lose face. He was a whimsical mixture of wisdom and boastfulness, of brag and ability to make good.

"I have occasions of my own, Peter." Pan winked. "We shall get in touch later. Make the most of the wits the gods bestowed upon you, remember my warning, avoid the centaurs if possible, placate Cheiron, admire his wisdom. It may well be that you will have many adventures to tell me when next we meet again."

It struck Peter that Pan spoke slyly. A mortal could never wholly trust the gods. They held your affairs on their knees as one holds a game, and often left you to finish it, when they found it tiring—a problem requiring too much effort.

Sometimes, perhaps, a god would come from the mechanism and untangle things, but the Olympians were prone to start you off, and leave you to shift for yourself. They liked to be regarded as benignant beings, but they were often cruel. They made a jest of Hephaestus, one of themselves, whenever he stumbled or was awkward. As for mortals, they acted too often like a boy who plays with a cat and winds up by putting walnut shells on its feet.

Yet the last sup of nectar Pan had given him flowed strongly in Peter's veins, invigorating alike to body and spirit.

"I may be able to tell another Odyssey," said Peter. "Though I don't expect to equal him, or to take so long about it, I hope—*I hope, I hope, I hope.*" He thought the last six words. Pan chuckled, picked his nose, scratched his left flank.

"Twenty years in Olympus means little," he said sententiously. "Ten years of Odysseus' absence from Penelope were spent at the wars. As for his travels, when a man takes ten years more to get home to his wife on top of the first ten, it is best to have a good tale to tell. If indeed he did tell all. I doubt if Penelope was ever entirely satisfied."

Pan sat back, scratching his ribs, pleased with himself.

"Surely Penelope was faithful, great Pan?"

"No doubt, Peter, no doubt. Antinous and the other suitors may not

have appealed to her, my lad. The matter of faithfulness, after all, is relative, as are all things."

Every now and then Peter heard such scraps of wisdom from Pan that made him feel that there was nothing new under the sun. And now he strove to conceal a fleeting memory that linked the names of Hermes, Pan's father, with a Penelope, whom some said was a nymph, others—that was doubtless a *relative* matter. The word had many meanings.

Pan paid no attention to that thought. He was up, shouldering the looped bag in which he carried his nectar, ambrosia, and the magic salve, their containers carefully packed in fine lamb's wool. He gave a flourish on his pipes and went bounding off, soon out of sight, his music growing fainter and fainter.

Peter was alone, in a wild glen of the Erymanthian Ridge, the country of the centaurs. For a while he lay on his back among the wild, sweet-smelling asphodel, that seemed to him the same as daffodils.

PETER sprang to his feet. He looked south, over ridge after ridge. Beyond them lay Sparta, beyond Sparta the Mediterranean.

Why stay here for centaurs to ax and bludgeon him, why, at a whim of Zeus and his consorts, face Python? The way was open, surely, to return.

"I'm a chump," he said aloud. "It's time you awakened, Peter. And got back to earth."

Peter headed east. Pan had gone west. But there must be a way out of the glen. A brook was flowing in his direction. The brook must join a river, and the river find the sea.

He saw the outlet, gated with columnar rocks, a narrow portal, but beyond it was liberty and mortality.

Suddenly he became aware that it was hard to breathe. He seemed to be in a vacuum, his lungs struggling to fill with the rare atmosphere. And then he was stopped, arrested as a man may be held back by some mighty wind. But no breeze stirred the yellow asphodels. Their golden heads barely nodded.

He thought of Jim Bridger's story of the cliff of obsidian, through which he could see the elk he shot at, and could not hit. Vision was clear enough. It was to Peter as if he looked through a vast sheet of glass, slightly plastic but impenetrable, an atmospheric barrier that barred his way, held him in this land of enchantment. He thrust against it until the sweat broke out on him, but could not advance an inch.

Was this the will of Zeus, sealing him in this bourn until his task was won—or lost, and he with it?

He retreated to a little knoll and sat down, weak in soul, of will and body. He sat with his aching head bowed to his knees, held in his trembling hands, exhausted and demoralized.

Gradually he felt restored. He summoned his reason to face the situation. He had merely encountered some alpine phenomenon, he strove to assure himself.

Pan had said if you thought long enough, and hard enough, about a thing—*it was*. Peter set himself to think hard enough to prove a thing was *not*.

"It's all rot," he declared aloud. "I'm going to try some other route out of this. I'm going to get down where I can get tobacco and a good earth-bound shot of liquor."

He saw a gap in the escarpment to his right. Nothing hindered him as he neared it. About him were rock fragments eroded from the

ridge. On one of them a dwarf cedar, gnarled and twisted but with a sturdy trunk and leafy crown, flourished in the scanty soil it had found. It was a symbol of fortitude, of success over difficulties.

"What a tree can do, I can do," said Peter to the cedar. "Not that I want to remain rooted here, but I—"

A brazen, terrific clamor smote the air. It sounded as if the dome of heaven had been split from zenith to nadir. It deafened him, it changed all the light into a lilac glare, out of which there shot a flaming bolt of fire.

That struck the cedar, left it a shriveled stump, while beneath it the rock was riven to its base in a gaping cleft.

The air stank of brimstone. The flavor of it was brassy to his tongue and palate. The earth trembled and seemed to run beneath his feet in fluid waves, so that Peter was thrown to his knees—to all fours.

Zeus, evidently enough, had spoken—with a bolt from the blue.

The tremors ceased. Now Peter could smell the charred pungency of the cedar. He got to his feet gingerly, marveling that he was able to function.

Peter looked up the glen and saw a troop of wild horsemen coming at a gallop. They thundered on at high speed in phalanx formation that suddenly shifted to a crescent, with two horns, that started curving inward.

He stared at them and knew they were not a horde of riders, but centaurs. They had sighted him and they meant to ride him down.

They came on with harsh cries that were only half human. He saw the gleam of their eyes, he saw their beards flowing back to mingle with their manelike hair. He saw the glitter of double-headed axes swung high above their heads, while others

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flourished limbs of trees, clubs that Heracles might have chosen.

The clamor of their voices in the view-halloo drowned out the thudding of their hoofs.

PETER broke the spell that seemed to bind him, sprinted to the cleft in the rock. He reached it as the horns closed in like nippers. It narrowed rapidly and he thrust the container with the salve in it into the wedge of the ragged walls as the centaurs checked and circled round the crag. The sight of its changed aspect, of the destroyed cedar—that must have been a landmark for them—disconcerted them.

Their quarry had bolted to earth. Peter climbed for his life up the split with hands and knees, elbows and feet, forging upward in froglike movements like a mountain climber in a natural chimney.

He reached the summit of the rock and lay there panting at the base of the half-consumed cedar, his heart going like a drum in a swing orchestra.

He was safe for the time. Centaurs could not climb.

One came charging into the rift and had to back out. Peter stood up, and hoarse shouts of rage and hate greeted him. The creatures—half man, half horse—careered about the rock, shaking their weapons at him, uttering their uncouth, incoherent sounds. Peter felt they were unpleasantly single-minded.

Their faces were long and narrow. There was a certain horsiness about them as they looked up at Peter, halting at last in front of the cleft and pawing at the turf and the yellow asphodels, swishing their tails and sometimes letting out high, whinnying noises.

They seemed in good condition, though some of their hides were shaggy and less glossy than others. That might be age, Peter thought.

Most of them were scarred and several of them were lame. He wondered if it was because of their frogs. Then he saw that their hoofs were quite badly chipped, worn unevenly, as if by too much galloping over and amid rocks.

They seemed intelligent for animals—not overbright for men. Apparently there were few Cheirons among the centaurs. Peter saw one who seemed the leader of the troop. He had lustrous eyes, and the flowing mustachios, beard and hair were tawny. His body was compact and strong, a dappled gray.

Peter held up his hand and they grouped with the gray in front.

"I am on a mission for Zeus," he cried, not sure they would understand him. But it was plain that they did.

They laughed, and Peter could not help the thought—uncertain though he was that his bluff, if it were to be styled a bluff, would go over—that they were giving him the horse laugh.

The leader spoke.

"If you are on a mission for Zeus, why did he fling a bolt at you?"

Peter managed a laugh in his turn. "Does Zeus miss his aim? He flung the bolt to make me a refuge from you mad ones."

After all he was a messenger in a liberal sense. He heard a low growl of thunder and looked north to where the snowy crest of Olympus was hidden by dark clouds, in which lightning played. Peter fancied that this was not on his account, that it was more likely to be Zeus displaying his private spleen in a family quarrel, but he took advantage of it. He pointed to the mountain.

"Be it on your own heads if you delay me," he cried. "I am seeking Cheiron, bearing a gift."

The centaurs bunched, consulting. The leader said:

"I will bear you to Cheiron. He will know if you are what you claim."

Peter looked at the rounded barrel of the leader. He had ridden horses bareback before now. And there seemed nothing else to do. Since he was committed to his task, since it had been made plain to him that forces, whether natural or supernatural, were leagued against his present escape, he must make the best of it, play his cards as if he held the trumps.

The clouds had shifted on Olympus. The dazzling crest showed radiant once again. It might not be an augury, but he could make use of it.

"Zeus has heard you," he said. "Behold!"

THEY were impressed. Some of them seemed surly but the leader had accepted him, at least for the time. Peter slid down, got his salve, walked out and faced them.

The leader pawed the ground three times, bowed his neck. Suddenly they seemed impressed, if not awed.

"Why did you not tell us you were a god?" said the dappled leader, looking at Peter's feet.

Peter looked, too. The sun was back of him. The shadows of the centaurs were stout upon the ground. But Peter, like Pan, cast no shadow.

It must be the temporary effect of the ambrosial anointing, he thought. The unguent had some mysterious faculty of rendering his body capable of arresting actinic rays, or perhaps translucent to them. It would wear off after a time.

"It is not always meet to declare such matters," he said. "Nor did I

know that you were capable of such discernment."

"We are not altogether ignorant. Now, if you will mount?"

The leader held back a cupped hand and Peter set his foot in it, caught at the top of the bare withers where they sprang from the back loins of the creature, straddled him, got a grip with his knees.

Short hairs grew down the centaur's back but they were a poor excuse for a true mane. Peter trusted that he could ride well enough not to have to clutch at the centaur's human torso. It blocked his view forward.

The leader gave an order Peter could not understand. The troop formed about the leader and they were off, up the glen. The centaur's gait was easy and springy. Peter found he was enjoying the ride. His wits rose to the occasion, and his spirits matched them.

The cavalcade swung off into a gorge that rapidly narrowed and deepened between steep cliffs. The ground was broken, and Peter found the going more difficult. The leader spoke to him, with respect in his voice:

"This is the shortest way. Usually we would not take it because of the Lapithae, who are ever trying to waylay us. They have never forgotten the time their king, Pirithous, invited us to his wedding feast. The wine was strong and plentiful. It went to our heads. Also there were many maidens present. We tried to carry them off, together with the bride. We should have succeeded, had it not been for Theseus, who took their side. But this is no news to you."

"Those matters are known to the gods," Peter admitted.

He saw that they went warily, watching the cliffs, the detritus of fallen rimrock.

"But now that you are with us, there is naught to fear."

Peter hoped that the leader's optimism would turn out true.

"If you fight," he said, "I cannot prevent you from being wounded. Blood may flow."

"But not from you. As for ourselves, we also can wound."

They went on a little farther. It seemed to Peter that if they were ambushed in this place their best course was flight. He trusted he could make the leader see it that way, in case of trouble. He formulated his mode of counsel, should it be needed. As a god, with ichor in his veins, he would hardly be deemed a coward. "Discretion is the better part of valor." That would be appropriate.

The canyon ran north and south. It was a dusky place, into which little sun ever shone.

Suddenly a battle cry rang out, coming from both sides, echoing back and forth amid the cliffs as men rose, clad in skin tunics. A level hail of arrows, discharged with incredible rapidity, came from the half-concealed Lapithae.

The shafts were well and strongly aimed. The centaur on Peter's right and a little ahead went to his knees and fell over, an arrow buried to the feathers in his side. Another was pierced through the neck. More were hit, and the Thessalian assailants shouted in triumph. They had let the centaurs ride well into their trap.

It was useless to charge, to try to come to close combat where the axes and clubs could get into play. They would be shot down before they reached the fallen masses through which they could not go.

The long lances would reach them before their blows could fall.

The wind of an arrow ruffled the hair of the leader. Another scored his back with a red gouge, from which blood streamed. Peter felt the wind of a third.

Their safely entrenched foes howled taunts at them. The arrows came too fast for eye to follow. They sounded like great swarms of bees above the twanging of the bowstrings, the yells of the Lapithae.

"Turn back," Peter cried. "Back to the gully we passed just now on the left. Get to the ridge above them. It is your only chance."

The leader bellowed an order, whirled so swiftly that Peter was almost unhorsed—uncentaured. The dappled gray led what was left of his troop in a race for the gully. The Lapithae rushed from their rocks and started lancing the fallen.

The leader galloped fast. Peter felt his mighty muscles flex and reflex as he went up the gully in great bounds, reached the ridge. His survivors followed, few of them unscathed, their sides heaving.

Peter trusted they would not turn on him. He wiped off the blood on his face as well as he could with a not perfectly clean, but useful, handkerchief. So long as they thought him a god, this was no time to disabuse them.

He was lucky, he thought, not to have been wounded, and so revealed that his veins leaked sanguine blood

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instead of ichor. If ichor ever leaked?

"My name is Pyloetius," said the leader. "It is well you were with us. We are grateful, and Cheiron will be also."

"My name is Petros," Peter told him, thinking it wiser to give it the Greek equivalent. "I am glad to have been along."

"This ridge leads to another," said Pyloetius. "It will take longer, and many of us are lame."

"For your sore frogs I will give Cheiron a cure," Peter told him. "And it may be I can do something for your hoofs, to prevent them cracking and chipping." He had an idea about that but was not sure how practical it might be.

Far to the north, Olympus lifted a vague mass of purple helmeted with crystal, serene against the wheeling constellations.

Peter wondered what the gods were up to? Reveling, perhaps, quaffing chalices of nectar, eating ambrosia, which he vaguely imagined as some sort of jam or jelly. Pan was wooing his dryad maid, trying to coax her into the open with the magic of his pipes.

He could have used a lap of nectar himself, and a bellyful of something substantial. He hoped Cheiron would come across with a meal.

They came to a plateau, crossed it. A pile of great rocks rose before them. Peter saw a winking light, ruddy, cheerful.

"That is the fire of Cheiron. It burns within his cavern," said Pyloetius. It will be best if I announce you."

They halted outside the mouth of the cave, its entry the shape of an inverted V. Peter slipped off the leader's back, a little stiffly. He told himself he would be sore tomorrow. He watched Pyloetius go into the cavern.

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